

The New Criterion

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December, 1984

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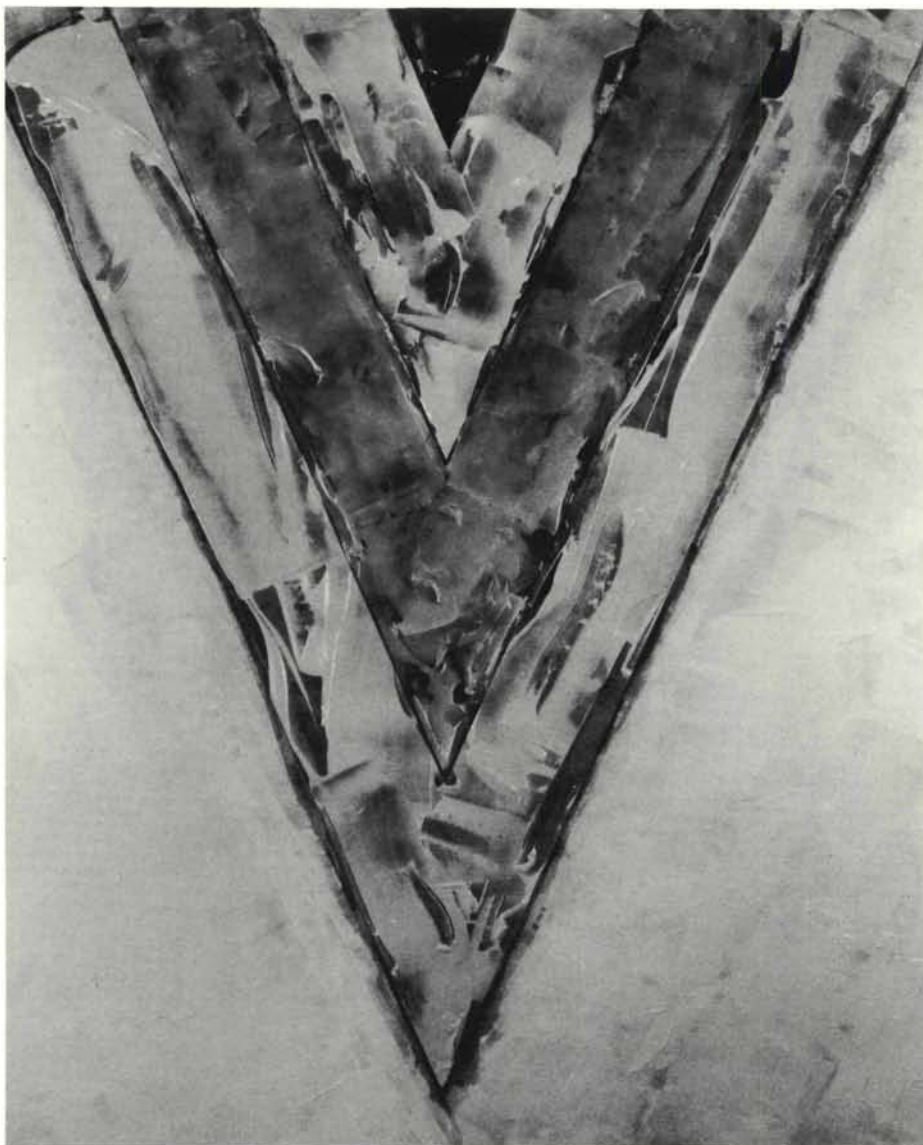
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Publisher *Samuel Lipman*

Managing Editor *Erich Eichman*

Assistant Managing Editor *Eva Szent-Miklosy*

Poetry Editor *Robert Richman*

Office Manager *Colleen Babington*

Contributors to this issue

Bruce Bawer's essay on the fiction of John Hawkes appeared last month in *The New Criterion*.

Fred Brown is the author of *Theater and Revolution: The Culture of the French Stage*. He is currently at work on a biography of Emile Zola.

Charles Dempsey is professor of Italian Renaissance and Baroque art at Johns Hopkins University.

Eric Gibson writes about current exhibitions for *The New Criterion*.

Creighton Gilbert is editor-in-chief of *The Art Bulletin*.

Roger Kimball, a free-lance writer, has written for *The Thomist* and *The Bennington Review*.

Mimi Kramer is the regular theater critic for *The New Criterion*.

Samuel Lipman is the music critic for *Commentary*. A collection of his essays, *The House of Music*, was recently published by David R. Godine.

Herbert Morris's volume of poems, *Peru*, was published by Harper & Row last year. His work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Kenyon Review*, and *The Hudson Review*.

Jed Perl, a painter and critic, teaches at the Parsons School of Design.

James W. Tuttleton teaches American literature at New York University. He is the author of *The Novel of Manners in America*.

René Wellek is Sterling Professor Emeritus of Comparative Literature at Yale University. He is the author of *A History of Modern Criticism* and, with Austin Warren, of *Theory of Literature*.

Philip Young is Evan Pugh Professor of English at Pennsylvania State University. His most recent book, *Hawthorne's Secret*, was published in August by David R. Godine.

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The “Primitivism” conundrum

by *Hilton Kramer*

The exhibition which the Museum of Modern Art has mounted this fall under the title, “‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art,” is an event of unusual interest.¹ Even before one has entered the exhibition itself, one is struck by something odd and interesting in its title. I refer to those highly suggestive quotation marks which hold the word “Primitivism” so visibly in their grip, appearing to separate it from its customary associations while at the same time nudging it (or so it seems) in the direction of irony and doubt, and thereby alerting us to a possible shift in historical perspective. As a result of those insistent quotation marks, one is more or less obliged to enter this exhibition with a large question on one’s mind—a question not only about the phenomenon of primitivism itself and what it meant before it sprouted this newly acquired grammatical encumbrance, but about the exact relation that is now thought to obtain between this new and, as it were, problematical “Primi-

tivism” and the older, more familiar, unquoted primitivism of yore.

Yet, though the question is posed in the title of the exhibition, it remains resolutely unanswered, if not indeed unanswerable, in the exhibition itself. To understand the decision, obviously a carefully considered one, to enclose the word “Primitivism” in those unexpected quotation marks, one must therefore turn to the weighty, two-volume publication that does not so much accompany the exhibition as supply it with its all-encompassing *raison d’être*.² In fact, one must study this two-volume work, with its nineteen essays written by a formidable team of scholars, in order to understand the exhibition itself and not just those pesky quotation marks. (The latter, by the way, pretty much disappear in the body of the book—a subject to which I shall return.) And this alerts us to another odd and interesting thing about this exhibition. It appears to have been conceived as a contribution to thought, and not as just another exhibition tracing the course of a familiar artistic development. What it attempts is nothing less than a full-scale study of the multiform role—esthetic, cultural, and spiritual—played by the art of primitive peoples in the artistic achievements

1 “‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern,” directed by William Rubin in collaboration with Kirk Varnedoe, opened at the Museum of Modern Art on September 27 and remains on view through January 15. It will then travel to the Detroit Institute of Arts (February 27–May 19) and the Dallas Museum of Art (June 23–September 1). The exhibition includes approximately one hundred and fifty modern European and American works and more than two hundred tribal objects from Africa, Oceania, and North America.

2 “*Primitivism*” in *20th Century Art* edited by William Rubin. The Museum of Modern Art (distributed by New York Graphic Society Books). Two volumes, 689 pages. Hardcover, \$80; softcover, \$30 until January 30 and \$40 thereafter.

of the modern era. Thus, whatever the exhibition may offer us in the way of visual delectation—and parts of it certainly offer a great deal in this respect—its principal goal lies elsewhere. For this is an exhibition designed, above all, to illuminate the place occupied by certain *ideas* in shaping a large area of the cultural terrain in which our artistic aspirations and accomplishments have had their genesis.

This, it seems to me, is a commendable ambition. Modernist art is, by and large, an art of ideas. It remains an art of ideas even (or especially) when it turns against the inherited modalities of Western thought in favor of those that are understood to be of a more primitive origin, and the trouble with a great many exhibitions devoted to modernist art is not that they tell us too much about these ideas but that they tell us too little. As a result, the objects on view tend to be denuded of the intellectual impulses that are very often central to their conception. On the other hand, the kind of ambition which this particular exhibition has set for itself is extremely difficult to implement. The museum exhibition format does not easily lend itself to the exposition or exploration of ideas. The temptation to simplify complex issues is all but irresistible, for there is a limit as to how much thought the visitor to an exhibition can be expected to absorb in his encounters with the objects on display. In the end, ideas must be "packaged" for quick consumption, and this inevitably leads to a superficiality, if not an outright distortion, that is likely to subvert the seriousness of the entire enterprise. Given the conditions of contemporary museology—most especially, the need to attract large box-office revenues in order to amortize and/or justify the large expense involved in producing such exhibitions—the problem would appear to be an insoluble one.

The solution that has been attempted in the case of the "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art" exhibition is not, I think, a success. The contribution to thought which the exhibition was clearly intended to embody is largely confined to those two hefty volumes

which the museum has published in lieu of a catalogue. And it is not a question, in this installation, of allowing the objects to speak for themselves. Almost nowhere in this exhibition are they permitted to do so. Much of the show is presented to us in a rigidly didactic format. The atmosphere of instruction is often heavy and unrelenting, with a great many objects juxtaposed and illuminated in display cases very much as if they were pairs of slides projected on a screen in a classroom. Even the lights in the galleries have been dimmed to underscore the slide-lecture atmosphere, yet the "lesson" to be derived from the spectacle proves to be elusive. Those two big volumes run to hundreds of pages of text, augmented by hundreds of notes (some of them miniature essays in themselves) and hundreds of glossy illustrations (many of them devoted to objects not included in the exhibition); yet only a kind of caricature of this impressive compendium of history, analysis, and reflection survives in the lengthy explanatory labels which importune the visitor to the exhibition at every turn, telling him exactly what to make of what he is looking at. Despite the fact that we are almost everywhere treated as beginning students for whom the visual attributes of every object and the "affinities" linking one with another must be pointed out and their every "meaning" explicated and summarized, we are allowed to leave this dazzling survey with only the dimmest notion of what its true significance may be.

The truth is, this exhibition is often a mere shadow of the book that has occasioned its organization, and much that is important in the book—and important to the subject—is either scanted or omitted in the exhibition itself. For example, the essay on "German Expressionism," written by the late Donald E. Gordon and included in Volume II of *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art*, is not only a brilliant analysis of the crucial role played by primitive art and primitivist ideology in the development of the Expressionist movement; it is probably the single best small-scale account of Expressionism as a

European cultural phenomenon any writer has yet given us. It also has the virtue of illuminating a good deal more than the subject of German Expressionism. Professor Gordon had pondered this subject for many years, and he had a deeper grasp of it than any other American art historian. What he had come to understand was "that primitivism affected Expressionism in *two* ways: both as life idea and as art idea," and he set himself the task of illuminating this double allegiance, which stands in such marked contrast to the more purely aesthetic manner in which the discovery of tribal art affected the artists of the School of Paris.

In Germany [writes Professor Gordon in this essay] . . . Expressionists discovered in themselves a kinship with agrarian peoples. It was easy to idealize such peoples around 1910-11, during Germany's rapid urbanization, or again around 1919-20 after a dehumanizing, mechanized war. In city studios artists re-created the imagined environment of tribal life. And in the countryside the life style of peasants was appreciated for its own sake. Some artists even "went native" during summer vacations, living in the nude with their models and practicing a sexual camaraderie that paraphrased—so they thought—the supposed instinctual freedom of tribal life.

As with life style, so with art style: German artists emulated Primitive example. The prototypes ranged from the flat and silhouetelike painted reliefs of Palau to the powerful, three-dimensional forms of Cameroon sculpture. There is a hardy "look" to much Expressionist art—angular in shape, geometric in detail, stubby in proportion—that is unthinkable without the Primitive precedent. Vitalism was also important: Eyes, mouths, breasts, genitalia were all given expressive prominence. Even in repose the Expressionist face and figure seem packed with energy. These are all German derivations from tribal art.

Yet, despite their profound debt to primitive art and a primitivist ideology, the Expressionists remained firmly attached to one of the most deeply entrenched tradi-

tions of Western thought—the romantic tradition that invoked the purity and vitality of nature as an alternative to the moribund forms of inherited culture. It was part of the paradox of their situation that it was, however, by way of culture—specifically, the writings of Nietzsche and Walt Whitman—that they came to their appreciation of the primitivist ideal. "Thus the Expressionist [writes Professor Gordon] was engaged in a very particular kind of enterprise. He was conducting a dialogue between *Urnatur* and modern art, a dialectic between primordial nature and advanced culture . . . What Expressionists added to this romantic tradition, however, was an understanding of *consciousness* as the link between nature and art. For them the issue was how the mind translated instinct—the mainspring of nature—into art as the high achievement of culture. Expressionists faced the issue as Nietzsche had, by demonstrating a tie between the primitive and the modern mind, between the 'savage' storyteller and the modern artist-dreamer."

This, it seems to me, goes to the heart of the matter that is ostensibly explored in the "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art" exhibition, and there is no way for the subject to be fully grasped without according to the Expressionist movement a major role in the exhibition itself. It was the German Expressionists, after all, who adopted certain views (most especially the view of primitivism "both as life idea and as art idea") first broached in the life and work of Gauguin, with whom this exhibition begins chronologically, and made them central to their entire artistic and spiritual mission. And it is in the ethos, if not the aesthetic, of the Expressionist movement that we find the most vivid foreshadowing of that concern for primitivism "as life idea" which looms so large in the "Contemporary Explorations" section of this exhibition, the section dealing with art since 1970. Between the ideas of the Expressionists and those of the artists represented in the "Contemporary Explorations" section there are indeed many important resemblances, for in its ideolog-

ical outlook—though seldom in the art which resulted from it—the Expressionist movement anticipated a great many of the beliefs that dominated the radical counter-culture of the late Sixties and thereby came to play a transfiguring role in the neo-primitivist art of the Seventies. There is thus, in spiritual terms, a direct line of descent that can be traced from Gauguin to Expressionism to the neo-primitivist outlook of the Seventies. It differs greatly from the more purely aesthetic line that leads from Gauguin to the Fauves and to Picasso. It constitutes, in fact, one of the major *révolté* traditions of cultural life in this century, and one naturally expected it to receive appropriate attention in an exhibition called "‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art."

Yet what do we find in the exhibition itself? Not for the first time at the Museum of Modern Art, the whole Expressionist movement is relegated to a more or less marginal position—almost, indeed, a position of inconsequence.³ In the so-called "History" section of the show, we are offered a miserly selection of objects shunted into a mean, corridorlike space that has the effect of belittling, if not actually obliterating, the entire subject. There is simply no way for the uninformed visitor to the exhibition to acquire, from either the works on view or the labels serving as a guide to them, any real sense of the Expressionists' contribution to the history being recounted here. And the Expressionists suffer an even worse fate in the introductory section of the exhibition, called "Concepts," from which they have been totally excluded. In this section of the exhibition, space has somehow been found for the work of Max Weber, an American painter whose oeuvre had only a passing relation to the subject, whereas a major Expressionist like Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, whose work is central to it, has been omitted. And in the

little throwaway booklet which the Museum provides for those visitors—the majority, of course—who cannot be expected to read those two big volumes, there is likewise no trace of the Expressionists' contribution. There is instead a silly little warning about a possible "misreading" of an Ibibio mask in relation to an Edvard Munch print. Exactly what Munch's *The Shriek* is doing in this exhibition remains something of a mystery, in any case, for it is only in the generation following Munch's that the Expressionists begin to interest themselves in primitive art.

One can only conclude that the prejudice against Expressionism is now so deep-seated at the Museum that the actualities of art history are no longer allowed to make themselves felt. This being the case, I suppose we should be grateful for the merciful exception that was made in the case of Professor Gordon's essay. What this means, however, is that the art historians and other specialists who read through Volume II of "*Primitivism*" in *20th Century Art* will know the truth and the larger public seeing the exhibition will not—a curious state of affairs, to say the least. The whole issue remains a disturbing and perplexing one, and the exhibition has been seriously damaged by the way it has been handled.

One could scarcely make a complaint of this sort about the treatment accorded to Picasso in this exhibition. The attention lavished on Picasso is so comprehensive, in fact, that much of this show consists of a protracted *hommage* to the master, making it in some respects yet another pendant to the mammoth retrospective which MOMA devoted to the artist in 1980. There is ample reason for this, of course. In his essay on Picasso for Volume I of "*Primitivism*" in *20th Century Art*—an essay, incidentally, that runs to over one hundred pages and constitutes a major monograph in itself—William Rubin writes that "In no other artist's career has primitivism played so pivotal and historically consequential a role as in Picasso's." In accordance with this view,

3 For a discussion of the way Expressionism has been slighted in the new installation of the Museum's permanent collection of painting and sculpture, see my essay, "MOMA Reopened" (*The New Criterion*, Special Issue: Summer 1984, page 29).

Picasso emerges as the dominant figure in the exhibition, and the principal revelations of the exhibition are, in fact, revelations about Picasso and the use he made of primitive art at crucial moments in his own artistic development.

The case that Mr. Rubin is concerned to make on this score is greatly strengthened by the abundance of material he has been able to marshal for this exhibition. A great many tribal objects from Picasso's own collection have been brought to the museum, and others that the artist would have seen on the occasion of his historic visit to the Trocadéro in Paris in 1907—the year that he completed the final version of *Les Femmes d'Alger*—have also been brought over. Many drawings from this period have also been gathered for the exhibition, including a good many not previously exhibited. We are thus in a position to see exactly what it was in these tribal objects that made so fateful an impression on Picasso's sensibility at a critical juncture in his development. The conjunction of these tribal objects and the drawings related to them, all seen now in the presence of *Les Femmes d'Alger*, leave one in little doubt about the depth of Picasso's response to what was then a new and profoundly shocking artistic experience.

It is Mr. Rubin's belief that this encounter with tribal art had the effect of altering not only the forms and even the color Picasso then employed in the completion of *Les Femmes d'Alger* but something much more fundamental in his artistic outlook—his sense of what the very function of art might be for him. Picasso later spoke of *Les Femmes d'Alger* as his "first exorcism picture." To André Malraux, he referred to the tribal art he saw at the Trocadéro as "magical objects . . . intercessors . . . against everything—against unknown, threatening spirits They were weapons—to keep people from being ruled by spirits, to help free themselves." For Mr. Rubin, then, the really crucial change that occurred as a result of Picasso's initial encounter with these tribal objects is to be found in the artist's effort to appropriate for his own purposes some-

thing akin to the "magical" powers he felt he had glimpsed in the art of these primitive cultures.

To support this view, Mr. Rubin is more or less obliged to speculate about exactly what it was that Picasso was so determined, at that crucial juncture in his life, to be free of. The answer that he proffers to this question—that Picasso was deeply involved in a private ritual designed to free himself of his fear of women and his fear of death—is not altogether unpersuasive. We have long known that Picasso's art was profoundly autobiographic from the outset, and there is no reason why *Les Femmes d'Alger* should be exempted from occupying an important place in the long "diary" of private emotions that his oeuvre is now often taken to be. Yet I wonder if I am alone in believing that this facile Freudianizing of Picasso's art—earlier on, Mr. Rubin speaks of Picasso's "precocious oedipal triumph" over his father in the Nineties—has the effect of trivializing the work in question? It certainly has the effect of overlooking, or at least diminishing, what it was that Picasso had in common with so many other modern artists when he looked to primitive art for inspiration. Surely we are not being asked to believe that the entire primitivist phenomenon in twentieth-century art derives from a fear of women? There are, to be sure, certain feminist art historians who have been attempting to promulgate precisely this view, but I doubt if Mr. Rubin counts himself among them. In any event, if it was Picasso's aim in painting the completed version of *Les Femmes d'Alger* to overcome his fear of women and his fear of death, he must finally be judged to have failed in that endeavor. Sexual rage remained one of the enduring leitmotifs of his art during a very long career, and death too continued to occupy a significant place among his themes. The "magical" properties Picasso so much admired in the art of primitive peoples were not, after all, something that an avant-garde artist working in Paris in the twentieth century could hope to appropriate. Their magic was not to be his. The real question is: what did *his* consist of?

We shall be a good deal closer to an answer to this question, I believe, if we abandon the attempt to provide *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* with a Freudian interpretation and shift the discussion back to where it belongs—to the life of forms in art and to the role played by radical changes in form in giving expression to an altered consciousness of civilization itself. Can anyone still doubt that the whole primitivist phenomenon in twentieth-century art was, at least in one of its important aspects, an outright attack on the conventions and assumptions of Western cultural life as they had come to be seen in the established values of advanced industrial societies? In this respect, certainly, Picasso—at least in the period of *Les Demoiselles*—was indeed attempting to effect a revolution in cultural consciousness.

That the culture he set out to attack and transform proved to be more resilient in its response to this assault than anyone at the time had reason to expect; that it showed itself capable of absorbing such assaults and profiting from the lessons to be learned from them—this, I should have thought, would now, in the next to last decade of the twentieth century, have become an acknowledged datum of critical intelligence. In his opening essay for "*Primitivism*" in *20th Century Art*, called "Modernist Primitivism: An Introduction," Mr. Rubin observes that "The Cubist artist's notion that there was something important to be learned from the sculpture of tribal peoples—an art whose appearance and assumptions were diametrically opposed to prevailing aesthetic canons—could only be taken by bourgeois culture as an attack upon its values." Yet it remains unclear whether or not Mr. Rubin believes this *was* an attack on bourgeois culture. I believe it was. I also believe it was an attack that profoundly altered the values of bourgeois culture, making it more receptive to alien modes of consciousness than it would otherwise have been. In the legendary conflicts between the avant-garde and bourgeois culture, we have tended to assume that it was the avant-garde alone which provided the dynamic element and that

bourgeois culture remained fixed and adamantly resistant to change. But this was not the case, and it is bad history to think so.

What I find sadly and conspicuously lacking in the hundreds of pages of text offered up to us in "*Primitivism*" in *20th Century Art*—which, for very good reasons, is bound to remain the classic scholarly work on this subject for many years to come—is any serious account of the way bourgeois culture responded to this primitivist assault on its values. That is a story yet to be told. It was to be expected that it would be omitted from the exhibition, but it is a special disappointment that it has also been omitted from a publication so evidently designed to provide a comprehensive account of its subject. By and large, the contributors to "*Primitivism*" in *20th Century Art* tend to steer clear of the social and political implications of their material. The outstanding exception, however, is Kirk Varnedoe's essay on the "Contemporary Explorations" section of the exhibition. There at last, in the concluding pages of Volume II, we are finally brought face to face with what Professor Varnedoe characterizes as the "dark side" of the primitivist phenomenon:

But there is a dark side to this issue as well [he writes], and it has to do with more than just bad art or even overtly pessimistic art. It has to do with primitivism per se, and it involves politics. All the questions [about] . . . collectivity versus individual experience, of controlling order versus instinctual liberty, translate eventually into larger political implications. Inasmuch as it has been by definition a critique of modern Western society, all primitivism has always had such implications, and they reverberate through good and sensitive art as certainly as through the broad range of neo-tribal agitprop that the last two decades have witnessed. The latter work, in which political concerns have been aggressively self-conscious and specific, most quickly forces to the fore uncomfortable questions about the ultimate content of all ideals that propose escape from the Western tradition into a Primitive state.

This entire "Primitivism" project—both the exhibition and the book—would have been a very different event, and a far more interesting one, too, I think, if it had addressed itself to this issue from the outset and not left it to the end. But one is grateful, all the same, for Professor Varnedoe's eloquent analysis of it.

As it happens, there is to be found in one aspect of this event a telltale sign of what the current response of bourgeois culture is to the primitivism phenomenon—I refer, of course, to those curious quotation marks which enclose the word "Primitivism" in the title of the exhibition and to which I alluded at the start of this essay. These quotation marks, it turns out, have nothing to contribute to our understanding of the subject under study. Contrary to the expectation they arouse when we first encounter them, they neither cast doubt on the concept of primitivism nor attempt to give it an ironic interpretation. As I mentioned earlier, they pretty much disappear from the body of the book once their use has been explained.

Their purpose, to be blunt about it, is political. They have been introduced into the title of this exhibition in the hope of forestalling criticism from those in the Third World and elsewhere who look upon the term "primitive" as a pejorative characterization of their cultural heritage. Mr. Rubin devotes a great many words to explaining why the term is necessary, and why it—and the term "tribal"—should not be regarded as in any way invidious. He does not want it to be thought that he is one of those terrible people who regard Western civilization as somehow "superior" to the cultures of primitive peoples. Yet when all of his ingeniosities on behalf of this dubious proposition have been concluded, he allows the word primitivism to slip right back into its standard usage. He is right to do so. But in this public display of nervousness and defensiveness, now made permanent in the title of this exhibition and its book, he has told us something important—and not something good—about the relation in which our culture now stands to the primitivist ideal.

Guy Davenport: fiction à la Fourier

by Bruce Bawer

It's hard, these days, not to be suspicious of experimental writing. So much of it seems to be produced by ego-happy no-talents whose main reasons for writing in an unorthodox manner are that (a) they are incapable of writing in the usual way, and (b) they know that it is a great deal easier to attract attention in some critical quarters by being different than by being good. So familiar is this phenomenon in the land of letters that when a genuinely gifted writer, having a very clear idea of what he is doing and why, attempts to reach us by an unfamiliar route, we are often, understandably, less than willing to pack up our gear and meet him halfway. Guy Davenport is such a writer. *Apples and Pears* is his fourth volume of stories¹ (the first three were *Tatlin!*, *Da Vinci's Bicycle*, and *Eclogues*), and he has yet to give us anything that an average contemporary reader would recognize as a conventional short story. Not for him the isolated incident, the limited setting and time frame, that have been the earmarks of the form since Edgar Allan Poe; not for him the deadeningly spare prose, the commonplace characters, and the no-ideas-but-in-things approach of the Bobbie Ann Masons and the Raymond Carvers. To Davenport—whose wide range of tastes and talents has been amply demonstrated by his poetry (*Flowers and Leaves*), classical translations

(*Archilochos*, *Sappho*, *Alkman*), scholarly editions (*The Intelligence of Louis Agassiz*), and critical essays in literature, art, history, and philosophy (*The Geography of the Imagination*)—life is a banquet and most short-story readers are starving to death.

The typical Davenport story, then, is a smorgasbord of colorful people, intriguing ideas, and rich, resonant language (plus, quite often, striking illustrations by the author, who is, on top of everything else, a very gifted artist). In "Tatlin!", Vladimir Yevgrafovich Tatlin, the Russian Constructivist artist, engineer, and theoretician, zips through the world of Nicholas II, the Revolution, Lenin, Stalin, *Kulturbolschewismus*, *la vie tzigane*, Chagall, Picasso (who tells him, "Plan nothing: make") Diaghilev, Nijinsky, Jacques Lipchitz, Moholy-Nagy, and Juan Gris, making buildings and airplanes, painting with a "wild boldness [that] was a childhood, a drunkenness of style," and philosophizing ("Art must die and be reborn in everything"; "A house is a vocabulary. A city is a language"; "Cézanne + Lenin = Konstruktivism"). In another story from *Tatlin!*, "The Airplanes at Brescia," Kafka and Max and Otto Brod go to Brescia for an air show put on by Blériot and Curtiss, walk in the footsteps of Da Vinci, cross the paths of Puccini and a strange man who turns out to be Wittgenstein, and observe that modern ideas and inventions have made the world new again: "This new thought was naked and innocent; the world would wound it in

1 *Apples and Pears and Other Stories*, by Guy Davenport; North Point Press, 320 pages, \$20.

time Did men know anything at all? Man was man's teacher. Anyone could see the circle in that." In "The Haile Selassie Funeral Train," from *Da Vinci's Bicycle*, James Joyce (d. 1941) and Guillaume Apollinaire (d. 1918) ride the funeral train of the Ethiopian emperor (d. 1975); while the train takes them "down the boulevard Montparnasse, which was in Barcelona," they talk about man, war, art, God, energy, Ibsen, and Orpheus.

It should be clear by now that Davenport has tended to pluck his protagonists from the most rarefied purlieus of twentieth-century intellectual and cultural history. He is, needless to say, a foursquare modernist; more than that, he's a devout Poundian, whose first three volumes of stories—with their profusion of philosophical tidbits, cross-cultural references, dropped names, and foreign words—inevitably recall the *Cantos*. Davenport even embodies the same paradoxes as Ezra Pound. His obsession with ideas goes hand-in-hand with a profound suspicion of them ("The mind is a washout," says a Davenport character who seems to speak for her creator. "Only the soul counts. Only feeling"). And his flat-out antipathy for the twentieth century is more than balanced by an overweening enthusiasm for the thinkers and artists who have helped to define it.

Apples and Pears is, essentially, more of the same. It's a Poundian's paradise from the word go, borrowing its epigraph from Ezra-raphile Louis Zukofsky and the title of the first of its four stories, "The Bowmen of Shu," from a poem by Pound ("The Song of the Bowmen of Shu" appears in *Cathay*). Perhaps no Davenport story is as purely Poundian as this one. It takes as its subject the life of the sculptor Henri-Gaudier-Brzeska, Pound's friend and fellow Vorticist, who died in the First World War at the age of twenty-three and whose first biographer was *il miglior fabbro* himself. As Pound makes clear in *Gaudier-Brzeska*, he valued the young sculptor because he was an artist "as independent as the savage" who, like the Paleolithic cave painters, put instinct over

reason every time. "The Bowmen of the Shu" reflects this view. Its form also owes a great deal to Pound's book, which is a grab bag of straight biography, anecdotal memoir, reprints of Gaudier-Brzeska's theoretical writings on art, the texts of his letters from the front, and photographs of his major works. "The Bowmen of Shu" is a disciple's distillation of all this—a *Canto*-like mosaic in words, illustrated by two Gaudier-Brzeska drawings and a dozen or so drawings by Davenport of Gaudier-Brzeska sculptures. It's as if Davenport has tried to put together the sort of thing Pound would have manufactured himself, had he chosen to memorialize his friend in a prose poem (which is what "The Bowmen of Shu" really is) rather than a book. Davenport aims, all at once, to convey the horror of the war in which Gaudier-Brzeska died, to persuade us of the astuteness of the man's artistic theories, and to give us a sense of the disparity between his humble origins and the glorious artistic and literary circles he ended up in. The result is a *tour de force* of compression. Davenport gives us forty-two paragraphs—none of which is connected by either time, setting, perspective, or logic to its neighbors, and many of which are only a line long—and in that confined space manages to carve a vivid word sculpture of his subject. In one paragraph, he has Gaudier-Brzeska describe the trenches ("white smoke and drizzle of sparks blowing across barbed wire in coils, the stink of cordite"); in another, he adumbrates the sculptor's relationship with Sophie Brzeska ("SOPHIE/ All night by her bed, imploring her. It is revolting, unspiritual, she said"). Davenport drops every name remotely worth dropping (among them Flint, Hulme, Tancred, Mansfield, Jacob Epstein, Modigliani, and Lewis) and quotes every theoretical statement worth quoting—as, for example, these first few sentences of Gaudier-Brzeska's "Vortex" (originally published in *Blast*):

SCULPTURAL ENERGY IS THE MOUNTAIN
Sculptural feeling is the appreciation of masses
in relation. Sculptural ability is the defining of

these masses by planes. The Paleolithic Vortex resulted in the decoration of the Dordogne caverns. Early stone-age man disputed the earth with animals.

The idea of the modern age as a return to the primitive—to the “Paleolithic Vortex”—is as central to Davenport’s philosophy, and to “The Bowmen of Shu,” as it was to the art of Gaudier-Brzeska. Davenport’s story is, in fact, perhaps best understood as presenting what is to its author an archetypal and profoundly ironic modern tragedy: namely, that Gaudier-Brzeska, an artist whose imagination has been liberated from convention by a Paleolithic Renaissance, is destroyed by a civilization that has, at the same time, abandoned its Victorian self-control and reverted to the instinctive savagery of primitive man. (As anthropologist Robert De Launay says to Gaudier-Brzeska in the trenches: “we are learning the Paleolithic in a way that was closed to us as *savant* and *sculpteur*.”) When the penultimate paragraph of “The Bowmen of Shu” records Gaudier-Brzeska’s death (“CORPORAL HENRI GAUDIER/Mort pour la Patrie. 4 Octobre 1891–5 Juin 1915”), the lesson we are supposed to take away with us is, manifestly, that life in this century is as ugly as its art is beautiful. If *Apples and Pears* is, in a sense, a one-man symposium on the problems and promise of the twentieth century. “The Bowmen of Shu” is a clever and concise keynote address.

The forty-two views of Gaudier-Brzeska are succeeded by “Fifty-seven Views of Fujiyama,” whose title recalls Wallace Stevens’s “Fourteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.” Like Stevens’s poem, Davenport’s story—composed of fifty-seven long, unlinked paragraphs—is something of an exercise in perspective. The odd-numbered paragraphs constitute the first-person account of a journey to the north of Japan by the late-seventeenth-century poet Matsuo Bashō, and are based on Bashō’s own writings. During the course of his travels, Bashō observes, communes with, and writes poems about nature—sometimes in the company of the fellow poets whom he meets along the way:

In Obanazawa I visited the merchant poet Seifu, who had often stopped on business trips to see me in Edo. He was full of sympathy for our hard way across the mountains, and made up for it with splendid hospitality. Sora was entranced by the silkworm nurseries, and wrote: *Come out, toad, and let me see you: I hear your got-a-duck got-a-duck under the silkworm house.* And: *The silkworm workers are dressed like ancient gods.* We climbed to the quiet temple of Ryushakuji, famous for being in so remote and peaceful a site. The late afternoon sun was still on it, and on the great rocks around it, when we arrived, and shone golden in the oaks and pines that have stood there for hundreds of years. The very ground seemed to be eternity, a velvet of moss. I felt the holiness of the place in my bones; my spirit partook of it with each bow that I made to the shrine in the silent rocks. *Silence as whole as time. The only sound is crickets.*

Remote, peaceful, silent, holy: this is the world of Bashō as described in the odd-numbered paragraphs of “Fifty-seven Views of Fujiyama.”

The even-numbered paragraphs are a more complicated proposition. Some of them form the first-person account of a contemporary American male who goes hiking in the Vermont woods with a seventeen-year-old girl, “with no purpose but to be in the wilderness, to be in its silence, to be together deep among its trees and valleys and heights.” But things don’t go well. He sees a mill that turns out not to be there; they lose the trail, stray into a swamp, get cold, hurt, and upset; and when they skinny-dip in the shallows of a brackish lake, they are intruded upon by a Boy Scout leader with “a Biblical air.” Some of the even-numbered paragraphs describe what appear to be the same man’s encounters with various noteworthy survivors of the modernist period, notably Ezra Pound (an extremely similar account appears in “Ithaca,” a story in *Da Vinci’s Bicycle*); some paragraphs describe his trip (in the company of a number of bourgeois tourists) to historic sights in Greece; and a couple of paragraphs consti-

tute cut-and-dried textbook descriptions of the provenance of various species of plants:

Sequoia Langsdorfii is found in the Cretaceous of both British Columbia and Greenland, and *Ginkgo polymorpha* in the former of these localities. *Cinnamomum Scheuchzeri* occurs in the Dakota group of Western Kansas as well as Fort Ellis *Cinnamomum Sezannense*, of the Paleocene of Sezanne and Gelinden, was found by Heer, not only in the upper Cretaceous of Patoot, but in the Cenomanian of Atane, in Greenland

The point of this inventive (though surprisingly unanimated) fugue seems to be that whereas Bashō, in his time and place, could perfectly and harmoniously integrate the roles of historian, wayfarer, poet, and naturalist, contemporary Western man suffers from a dissociated sensibility; the way our society is structured, and the way we have been taught to think and behave, make it impossible for us to bring the disparate elements of our lives into a happy conjunction, and to experience the natural world, in all its manifestations, as fully as possible. This is, as I say, what Davenport *wants* us to get out of the story. The actual effect of "Fifty-seven Views of Fujiyama" is something else again. The Bashō sections, which at first seem to possess a luminous and fragile beauty, soon begin to sound mechanical and monotonous, and eventually evoke a picture of medieval Japanese life and poetry that is, alas, so numbingly dull that, at the end of the exercise, one is almost inclined to fall to one's knees and thank God for being born in the Atomic Age. This is, one can be sure, not quite what Davenport had in mind.

"The Chair" is the shortest and slightest story in *Apples and Pears*, and the only one in which the paragraphs cohere throughout in the manner most of us are used to. It describes an encounter at Marienbad between Franz Kafka and the Rebbe from Belz, and seems to have been written so that Davenport could ask, "Who will write the history of affection?" (answer: *he* will, in the following story), and so that Kafka, at the end,

could offer up a prayer to God, acknowledging that it is "absurd . . . for one insignificant creature to cry that it is alive, and does not want to be hurled into the dark along with the lost. It is the life in me that speaks, not me, though I speak with it, selfishly, in its ridiculous longing to stay alive, and partake of the presumptuous joy in being." Modern literature as a cry of life, an assertion of the joy in being: this is the perfect note for Davenport to strike at this point in *Apples and Pears*.

For the next (and last) item in the book is the novel-length "Apples and Pears," which is by far Davenport's longest work of fiction and arguably his most ambitious and adventurous exploration ever of life, art, thought, and affection in the twentieth century. To a large extent, the purpose of the three stories that precede "Apples and Pears" is simply to prepare us for it. If "The Bowmen of Shu" means to remind us what this cruel, primitive century is capable of doing to brilliant, primitive modern artists, "Apples and Pears," set in 1981, presents us with a young artist named Alexander Floris who is as primitive and modern as Gaudier-Brzeska but who, unlike that painter who died "pour la Patrie" in World War I, rejects the world and its alarms entirely and finds thereby a happy, fulfilling life. If "Fifty-seven Views of Fujiyama" implies that the contemporary Western sensibility is a shattered one, "Apples and Pears" purports to depict some contemporary Western Europeans who recover for themselves the simple, natural harmony that Bashō knew. And if "The Chair" describes the desperate desire of Franz Kafka, that prototype of the tortured modern mind, to "partake of the presumptuous joy in being," "Apples and Pears" seeks to show a group of modern types partaking, *Angst*-free, of all that life has to offer.

The subtitle of "Apples and Pears" is "Het Erewhonisch Schetsboek, Messidor-Vendémiaire 1981." According to a copy-right notice in the front of *Tatlin!*, *Het Erewhonisch Schetsboek* is the title of a book by one Adriaan van Hovendaal from which parts of Davenport's story "The Dawn in

Erewhon" (published in *Tatlin!*) are derived. Some of the characters of that story, set in the 1950s, reappear in "Apples and Pears," and there's no indication whether, and to what degree, the characters and situations described in "Apples and Pears" are actually taken from the works of van Hovendaal. At any rate, the story does, as the subtitle suggests, take the form of the diary-cum-notebook of van Hovendaal, a middle-aged Dutch philosopher, who describes therein his "complex friendship" with the aforementioned Alexander Floris, a nineteen-year-old Dutch painter whose serenity, sensitivity, sensuality, and lack of inhibition are all equally remarkable, and whom Adriaan has apparently helped, over the past couple of years, to educate and civilize. Like Gaudier-Brzeska, Sander (as the young painter is called) is a born savage who puts instinct over reason ("All I'm doing, Adriaan, is what I know how to do. I don't know what it means"). He and his sister Grietje are lovers, and Adriaan makes love to both of them, sometimes one at a time, sometimes *à trois*. After a brief ramble through Paris and an interval on an idyllic island, the three of them move into a cheerful, unpretentious little house in Amsterdam that they name Florishaus, and there they live a simple, natural life full of affection, creation, and contemplation. And that's about it. What action there is in the 240-page story consists largely of the comings and goings of the various members of the supporting cast, which includes: (a) two pubescent boys, Hans (Adriaan's nephew) and Jan, who are in love with each other and who (when they are not modeling nude for Sander) couple endlessly; (b) Joris Oudveld, a bashful eighteen-year-old German Lenin groupie (he kisses his bust of Vladimir Ilyich when he leaves his room) who thinks of his "hankering to hug gossoons" (i.e., young boys) as a form of Marxist rebellion; (c) Olaf, also eighteen, a Danish gymnast who runs a YMCA-like "wolfdens" in Copenhagen where pubescent lads make love to each other (and to him); (d) Godfried Strodekker, "chairman of the Neder-

lands Student en Arbeidersverbond voor Pedofilie," who gives closely argued lectures on pederasty; (e) Sweetbriar, an English philosopher; and (f) Wolfgang, a little street orphan whom Adriaan takes into Florishaus as Sander's assistant and (eventually) lovermate.

Depraved? Well, yes. But Davenport doesn't mean it to come off that way. On the contrary, he wants us to be enchanted—and, to a remarkable degree, he succeeds. Though a synopsis may make "Apples and Pears" sound like a low-budget porno movie, the story is actually reminiscent of pastoral poetry. Like the shepherds in Theocritus and Virgil, Davenport's characters are impossibly good, happy, and affectionate, and they live (for the most part) in a world that is impossibly lovely, tranquil, and timeless. For them, there are no taboos—they feel affection for one another, and sex (whether with man or woman, child or sibling) is their way of expressing it. Might such indiscriminate carrying-on be wrong? The question arises only fleetingly. "Why must we try to figure out why we're hugging anybody . . . ?" asks Grietje. "Love is love." "Human affinities," says Olaf, "come from any direction. My *slubberten* here are after affection one way or another, and are also heroically generous in giving it. Their puppy longing to hug and lie close is as God intended." Simple as that.

In "Apples and Pears," nobody feels hurt or jealous or guilty; nobody's being abused or psychologically damaged, nobody's in danger of contracting a social disease; there's no real conflict, no significant threat at any point to anybody, no substantial changes from day to day, no money worries, no authorities from the child protection bureau knocking at the door (though Grietje does mention this possibility at one point). Even Hans's and Jan's parents, liberal-minded folk that they are, are amenable to the exceptional goings-on at Florishaus. None of it, of course, is believable; but we believe. Davenport, magician that he is, *makes* us believe in (and even cherish) this bucolic never-never-land where everyone is innately good, no one does anyone harm, and love conquers all.

"Apples and Pears," then, is about the human race not as we know it, but as Davenport would like it to be. His vision derives largely from the work of a man whom he has called "the only philosopher of happiness"; the French philosopher François Marie Charles Fourier (1772-1837), to whom *Apples and Pears* is dedicated and whose presence in it is an even stronger one than that of Ezra Pound. Indeed, after lurking in the background of Davenport's previous books of fiction, Fourier, with *Apples and Pears*, takes center stage in Davenport's fiction. This is not to say that Davenport takes Fourier's philosophy seriously *qua* philosophy. Like his character Sander, he thinks of Fourier as "a sweet idiot," and considers his sincere proposals for the alteration of human society to be utterly impracticable, but "is nevertheless taken with the vision." The vision in question (which Fourier spent most of his life constructing) was of a utopia called Harmonium, where man's natural virtue (as posited by Rousseau, and believed in devoutly by Fourier) would, through the elimination of the tensions that destroy human society, be permitted to prevail, and where, as a result, everyone would live in peace, happiness, and harmony. And how would those destructive tensions be eliminated? Sex. Fourier felt, you see, that if we took the fetters off our various passions—sexual attraction being the primary one—and indulged them fully, all those tensions would vanish and life would be a dream. In short, as Davenport observes in "The Dawn in Erewhon," Fourier felt the answer to mankind's problem was "a life that would cooperate with the instincts rather than deplore them." To this end, Fourier urged the establishment of "phalansteries," communities that would constitute a sort of proving ground for Harmonium. And this, more or less, is the idea in "Apples and Pears." Though nobody in the story ever quite says so, Florishaus (whose residents aim for "society as poetry rather than the newspaper prose of history") is to all intents and purposes a Fourieristic phalanstery.

But Fourier is not the only utopian in the

picture. The names of Samuel Butler and his novel *Erewhon* crop up frequently in "Apples and Pears," and with good reason; for like the Erewhonians, Davenport's people detest machines, which more than anything else have made the twentieth century what it is. "Butler's insight," notes Adriaan, "was that the machine enslaved us, changing all work to drudgery. All work became pandering to the reproduction of the machines." He reflects

that no phalanstery anything like Fourier's is possible without an Erewhonian revolution, canceling machines. To return movement to walking, horseback riding, and the true dance. To return music to the instrument and occasion. To return love to passion as it arises. To return work to communal duty, to the sense of usefulness. To have the beginning and end of everything kept in sight and in the discourse of the whole phalanstery. To take happiness from money and restore it to the harmony of work and its reward, ambition and its achievement. To put mind and hand in concert. To reorganize society after its disastrous dispersal by train, automobile, airplane . . .

There's another thing the characters in "Apples and Pears" share with the Erewhonians: they're extremely attractive and well-bred, and have a nearly Nazistic regard for youth, strength, and beauty. This regard, as it happens, is as much Fourieristic as it is Erewhonian. "Physique is character," which might well have been a Hitler Youth slogan, is a Fourieristic principle quoted in "Apples and Pears."

As should be clear by now, "Apples and Pears" is only partly narrative. Though constructed chronologically, it is formally similar to "The Bowmen of Shu," with its mosaic of disconnected paragraphs that jump from narration to reflection to recon-dite quotation. Within a single diary entry, Adriaan is likely not only to tell us what he and Sander did, discussed, and ate today, but to quote passages (from a variety of poets, biologists, philosophers and the like) that apparently strike him as affirming some

tenet or other of Fourierist doctrine, and to recite chunks of grand-sounding gibberish (for example, about a parade of *chérubins et chérubines* and *séraphins et séraphines*) that don't even begin to make sense unless one is familiar with Fourier's complicated and bizarre blueprints for Harmonium. There is the usual Davenportmanteau of dropped names (e.g., Poussin, Picasso, Proust, Stravinsky, Satie, Schiele), but there are some unfamiliar names too. As if to emphasize that his story does not take place in the real world (as well as to acknowledge the story's indebtedness to a philosopher who lived during the Napoleonic new order), Davenport has Adriaan give dates according to the Napoleonic calendar; thus "Apples and Pears," set in summer and autumn, takes us through the months of Messidor, Thermidor, Fructidor, and Vendémiaire. Davenport's elegant, accomplished illustrations—which capture the story's exuberant and innocent sensuality in styles based variously on the Greek *kouroi*, Athenian vase paintings, and the works of Mondrian, Picasso, Braque, and other modern artists—similarly underscore the otherworldliness of the story's "elemental, clear joy." And Davenport's offbeat diction serves much the same purpose; when he is not using strange English words (such as *snurf*, *snurp*, *nicker*, *fritz*, *thrip*, *quiddit*, and *tallywhacker*), he is using Dutch words—most of them, fortunately, cognates (*erotisch*, *kameraad*, *puberteit*)—or dipping into French, German, Danish, Latin, or Greek. Often these deviations in diction occur when the subject is sex. Hence, Davenport describes Jan and Hans as "wucking and snuffling," and has one boy entice the other to disrobe by saying, "Come on, vriendje . . . poedelnaakt like me."

Which brings us to the major problem with "Apples and Pears": namely, that every so often it stops being a lyrical portrait of an otherworldly world ruled by affection and becomes—well, something else.

Sometimes, for instance, affection steals away into the background, leaving behind nothing but sex, sex, sex. At such moments, Davenport—as in some of his earlier sto-

ries—is likely to break into detailed descriptions of the male sex organ (for which he has more names, in English *and* Dutch, than the Eskimos have for snow) or of the extremely skimpy briefs and swim trunks that are the subjects of many of his illustrations (boxer shorts, like machines, seem to be *défendu* in Davenportland). At other times, more disturbingly, Davenport injects politics into his pastoral, apparently taking seriously his characters' beliefs that a universal "faith in good will" can be substituted "for the Capitalist assumption that all exchanges are of something for money"; that it is possible "to breed meanness out of human nature" simply by taking the world economy "from the greed of merchants and the vicious manipulation of the stock market and put[ting it] into the care of children on ponies"; and that Western society's refusal to allow children "erotic affection and a fully sensual life is an injustice too long imposed by puritanical prejudices, ignorance, and the narrowness of bourgeois propriety." Such silly rhetoric is hardly new to Davenport's fiction; like Pound, he has always tended to blame certain failings of human nature on Western democracy.

And that's a shame. But, as with Pound, the perverseness of Davenport's politics in no way negates the value of his work or the significance of his contribution to American literature. And make no mistake about it, that contribution is considerable. At a time in history when the prime criterion of excellence in American short fiction seems to be a sort of mindless, impersonal monotonousness, Guy Davenport's inimitable adventures in the realms of philosophy, language, and literary form are to be treasured. Davenport at his best reminds us how exciting and valuable literary innovation can be. And he does something else that is even more important: he reminds us of our humanity, and (however bizarrely) of the importance of affection. Dostoevsky, it is said, found Fourier's social program ridiculous, but praised him nonetheless for his obvious "love of humanity." He might well, one thinks, have done the same for Davenport.

Zola and Cézanne: the early years

by Frederick Brown

Emile Zola's father, François Zola, was a Venetian engineer who came to Paris in 1830, when opportunity beckoned. France having gone some way toward recuperating from the economic devastation brought about by Napoleon's far-flung campaigns, 1830 opened an era of rapid industrial development during which factories would multiply, markets would expand, railroad lines would radiate from the capital. There were huge prizes to be won exploiting the new technology and Zola soon found investors who liked his entrepreneurial zeal. Imaginative, versatile, and tenacious in the pursuit of wealth, he could as easily devise fortifications for Paris as turn out plans for a modern port at Marseille. But until 1838, no such large venture made it past the drawing board. Against an old-boy network of French engineers whose influence reached into the ministry that sanctioned public works, a foreigner fought at unequal odds.

In 1838, fortune finally smiled. Aix-en-Provence awarded him a contract to build a dam for collecting water in the Infernets gorge not far from Mont Sainte-Victoire and channeling it through the perennially drought-stricken countryside below. Several months later, at age forty-four, he married a nineteen-year-old Parisian girl of working-class background named Emilie Aubert, who, on April 2, 1840, bore him a son. It was 1843 before he felt sufficiently confident that the project would receive official authorization to lead his family south. In Aix they

rented a large house just outside the city wall that had once been the domicile of Prime Minister Adolphe Thiers. There Zola spent several more years conducting geodetic surveys, placating impatient creditors, and battling landlords opposed to a canal running across their property.

Success eluded him again. On February 4, 1847, the day work began in the Infernets gorge, where winter winds knife down from the Massif Central, Zola caught cold and six weeks later died of what was diagnosed as pleurisy. Aix buried him with all the pomp and ceremony it could stage for a citizen on whom devolved something of the magical power that Provençaux formerly invested in rainmaking saints. "He fell on arriving at the goal," declared one eulogist at the grave. "Just as he was about to crown his work, he succumbed in the prime of life, without having gathered the fruit of his long and painful labors."

What Emilie Zola gathered was wormwood, for soon after François died the canal company went bankrupt owing to the manipulations of a shareholder named Jules Migeon, and her stock, which should have made her a rich widow, made her an obstinate plaintiff instead. Debt-ridden, she initiated legal action against Migeon. The suit, with its unfavorable judgments and hopeless appeals, lasted so long that by 1854 even sympathizers looked at her askance. Rejecting as unworthy of her an estate more modest than the one she had come to anticipate,

Emilie sought not only her just portion but redress of the greater wrong life had done her when she found herself widowed at twenty-seven, demoted from "respectable" society, and thrust once more upon her parents, who helped her run the household. Had she settled with Migeon, she could have settled with misfortune. She chose to fight it, and thus created a substitute for marriage in litigation that became her *raison d'être*. Why Emile Zola's novels should often feature a young man enamored of some woman whom he could rescue from the ghost or demonic spirit to which she feels bound is not altogether mysterious. Rescue fantasies in which he figured as rescuer had been his daily fare long before books and theater acquainted him with the various forms they took as a convention of romantic literature. He found his decisive model at Aix, where Emilie held fast, like the old woman in *Bleak House* who lives near High Chancery Court with her caged birds, waiting for an end to the endless Jarndyce case.

Caged was how nineteenth-century witnesses often portray themselves in Aix. Indeed, a wall three kilometers long, overgrown with ivy and gillyflowers, ran around the town. It served no practical purpose of course, but when councilmen ridiculed it in 1848 as an excrescence, traditionalists rallied against those who would defile the city's sacred past. To them it was all that stood between their dream life and reality, between an *ancien régime* they kept embalmed and forces astir in the world outside. "It is not love of work we lack, nor intelligence," observed one Aixois in 1840. "What we lack is desire for material development, for the implementation of practical ideas." Among the gentry, such unstriving had become a mark of honor that distinguished Aixois from vulgar Marseillais. As Marseille waxed into a great commercial hub, Aix waned into a backwater whose few, energetic citizens did their best to advance the unlikely proposition that, given some encouragement, it might yet be roused from sleep. Encouragement was not given. Every major railroad

line across Provence skirted Aix, and its numerous hostelrys, which reflected the position it once occupied at a nexus of trade routes in southeastern France, closed one by one, or survived on the clientele that came to its hot springs with circulatory ailments. This eclipse left it without the capacity to replenish itself, for its death rate rose in mid-century well above its birth rate. Had Napoleon I visited total war on another generation, the effect could not have been much more grievous. Country girls found employment in Aix's rich households, but young men, unless they fancied working as tanners, or picking tobacco leaves and almonds, or skinning rabbits for felt, migrated south to Marseille. Monastic orders, every variety of which had its chapter there, did not lack initiates, and widows seeking out small lives abounded. A stillness hung over the city, an air of dereliction especially remarkable in the aristocratic neighborhood, where, midway through Louis Philippe's reign, old, impoverished nobles still had themselves carried to one another's townhouses in sedan chairs. On entering Aix, the visitor might feel that he had entered a kind of time warp. Turned in upon itself, it waited out each season much as it had the season before, under the immutable hulk of Mont Sainte-Victoire.

Emilie lived outside the wall until 1852. Soon after François died, she left her house on the impasse Silvacanne, which had become too expensive, and found another at the tiny hamlet called Pont-de-Béraud, half a kilometer northeast of Aix, where Emile had fields to wander in. Stricken during the winter of 1846-47 by some undiagnosed illness grave enough to have required the application of vesicants, he looked a weakling, pale and slender, with one droopy eyelid. Madame Aubert and Emilie, who recognized this tic for what it was, tried to mitigate the effects of the terrible blow he had received in losing his father by cossetting him as much as possible. Their own isolation in a province that usually gave Northerners, or "Franciots," short shrift, made them the more aware of abuse to which his Parisian

accent and a slight speech defect (he pronounced “s” as “t”) might subject him at school, so they kept him out. He had turned eight and not yet learned even the rudiments of reading and writing before they could bring themselves to have him enrolled at the “pension Notre Dame,” a small boarding school presumably stronger in catechism than in other subjects, whose master, Monsieur Isoard, did, however, wean him on La Fontaine.

Of his term at Isoard’s establishment Zola recalled only how he often played truant to join two friends named Philippe Solari and Marius Roux on frolics through the countryside. In 1851, another dislocation occurred when Emilie had him accompany her to Paris, where they spent some months with her brother Adolphe Aubert, who was the concierge at 2, Place Saint-Michel. By now it had become obvious that Emile, for all his alertness, would vegetate unless taken firmly in hand, but proper schooling at a *lycée* or a *collège* required money, and the tuition that barred ninety-five percent of French children from higher education was beyond Madame Zola’s means, especially after the canal company discontinued her stipend. She therefore entered him at the Collège Bourbon in Aix with some hope of being able in due course to exploit the good will François Zola had stored up for her among influential men. “The mayor read a request from Madame Zola, widow of the engineer who . . . planned the canal that bears his name,” read the municipal council minutes of July 22, 1854. “She solicits a scholarship to secondary school on behalf of his son and hopes, she writes, that the council will show its benevolence by awarding it as posthumous compensation for services her husband rendered to the city of Aix.” Whatever pain it cost her to go begging, at least Zola would not have this experience to draw upon later in life for proof of his observation that “in the provinces people show fallen families no mercy.” Aix’s municipal council came through with a scholarship.

Emile entered the Collège Bourbon as an *interne*, or boarder. Madame Zola yielded

him reluctantly to his new world (for, as she often told him, he was “her only consolation”) and took modest quarters on the rue Bellegarde, across town from the school, so that she could see him every day in a parlor reserved for such interviews. Having always had a room to himself, Emile was now cast among forty other boarders, each with his little iron bed and footlocker. As he soon discovered, the educational theory that held sheer discomfort to be a *sine qua non* of the tempering process whereby boys become young men had its exponents at the Collège Bourbon, which formerly housed nuns. In winter, his own body heat was all he had to keep him warm, and classroom recitations generated clouds of vapor. Nor did it promote a sense of well-being to study below street level in ill-lit rooms called *salles d’étude*, where humidity stripped whitewash off the walls. Worst of all for Emile, whose emotional balance would always hinge as much on what he ate as on what he wrote, the food dished out was so unpalatable that his fellow inmates occasionally ran amok over it. “Ah, what cuisine! Even now I feel nauseated to think of it,” he reminisced many years later. “To be sure, the quantity was sufficient, for one could have one’s fill of bread, but the quality left something to be desired. I remember horrible dishes, before which I stoically munched my dry bread, and, among others, a strange codfish stew that poisoned the mould We made up for it with bread, we stuffed crusts in our pocket and ate them in class and on the playground. During the six years I remained there, I was hungry.”

Emile’s classmates, those who came from Aix, were likely to be the children of notaries or lawyers, since aristocratic families traditionally bound their young over to the Jesuit order or to the Frères Gris. They struck him as an indolent lot puffed with assurance that their fathers’ practices would one day devolve upon them, no matter how poorly they did at school. “On leaving school, they would graduate directly from our benches to the old family armchair and sit behind a desk where some ancestor had

begun his fortune." The greater number of pupils were country boys, typically the sons of rich farmers eager to have them acquire some polish, who arrived like Charles Bovary in hobnailed boots from the Var region or the Basses-Alpes wondering why, and never finding an answer. "Almost all of them had skulls harder than the rocks on which they had grown," wrote Zola. "Many exhibited a true horror of books. I knew one in particular whose brain could not be made to hold three straight ideas. He spent days in the calm and ponderous attitude of an ox digesting food, with big, vacant eyes that would fix on the teacher as if he understood, when in fact his mind was absent. Not everyone was quite so stupid, but intelligent boys were the exception." After several years at the Collège Bourbon, they would leave Aix imperceptibly less cloddish for having been invited to model themselves on the ideal of human excellence drawn by Plutarch and Corneille.

An honor roll posted in the room where she met with him told Madame Zola that her son regularly achieved distinction as one of the school's best students. Having entered in the eighth form, somewhat behind his age group, he won high marks at the end of his first year and skipped a form. What hopes and expectations rested on this academic enterprise were made quite clear to Emile, who, though he was by no means bereft of humor, already mantled himself in the deep seriousness that became his usual demeanor. "My mother and grandmother had taken me more and more into their confidence as I grew up, acquainting me with their many worries; and besides, I could see for myself that the poverty of our home was always increasing, and that I should some day be entirely dependent on my own efforts." While hardships at home nurtured in him the idea, even without Madame Zola having to articulate it (which she did), that he must shoulder his father's dropped burden, at school a tacit bargain with his municipal benefactors required that he prove himself worthy of the dispensation they granted him because he was his father's son.

On other boys, who never questioned their inheritance, the past had conferred proprietary rights to a world that awaited them, like the armchair in the office. Where Emile was concerned, the past had receded, leaving him stranded in a harsh moral environment with nothing that was his except the wrack of debts for which he felt—and would indeed always feel—responsible.

We can imagine how frail Emile's self-esteem must have been during childhood from the despair that engulfed him much later, following the death of a literary father-surrogate, Flaubert, when everything he himself had accomplished suddenly seemed inane. His predicament brought him little sympathy at school, however, and an abundant literature testifies to the unkind treatment scholarship boys received from classmates who were keenly aware of all social and economic insignia. To be sure, Zola, in his one consequential memoir on the Collège Bourbon, which appeared soon after the great success he had had with *L'Assommoir*, saw fit to remember life there as a kind of Darwinian free-for-all that toughened him for the contests Paris held in store. Social station, he wrote, was forgotten in a "democratic" melee where physical strength decided rank, and the brawny yokel rather than the young patrician ended up lordling it over the playground. "Nothing can replace this communal education that transforms the child into a man. Let him beat and be beaten, let him suffer and mete out punishment, let him do what must be done to acquire solid limbs and a strong heart . . . Boys raised at home in their mothers' skirts remain girls . . . The *collège* fortifies well-constituted natures." But what the playground democracy hid, if it hid anything at all, was a snobbish society that ragged the *boursier* for living on alms. Zola's own friend, Marius Roux, made much of this in a novel entitled *Eugénie Lamour* and his knowledge came from Aix of course, where, in 1857, the inspector general, after visiting the Collège Bourbon, observed that "the regrettable facility with which parents place significant sums of money at the disposal of

students" undermined the principal's ability to exercise his moral custodianship.

At unguarded moments later, when Zola parted the curtain he had drawn, a different picture emerges, in which the virile initiation glorified above is seen to have been a psychological ordeal that scored deep wounds. More painful even than the undemocratic taunts hurled at him—"beggar," "parasite"—were the assaults on his modesty by roughnecks who lost no time discovering how shy he was and making him the butt of jokes. "Let us remember how it was at secondary school. Vices had fertile ground, so that one lived in true Roman putrescence. Any cloistered association of people who belong to the same sex is morally reprehensible," he wrote in 1870, and the Goncourts report him lamenting on one occasion that "I had a perverted youth in a wretched provincial school. Yes, a rotten childhood!"

Since the Collège Bourbon was surely neither Sparta in its glory nor Rome in its decline, an incident that took place long before Zola entered school will perhaps explain something of what compelled him to reflect upon his experience in such drastic terms. It is described in a report filed by the Marseille police on April 3, 1845: "We conducted to the Palace of Justice a person named Mustapha, 12 years old, a native of Algiers and a domestic in the service of Monsieur Zola, civil engineer, no. 4, rue de l'Arbre, who committed indecent assault (*attentat à la pudeur*) on the young Emile Zola, 5 years old." Did this distressing event, which must have occurred on his birthday, brand him with a sense of punitive apparatus society was prepared to mobilize against sexual miscreants?¹ It would seem so. Zola's moralistic outbursts later in life suggest that the guardian his father had been to him in life became, after death, the prosecutor from whose indignation Emile drew strength, even in turning that indignation

against himself. Robbed as he was of masculine assurance when his father died, he found manliness in the rectitude that obliged him to stand aloof and incriminate all those feelings aroused by the hurly-burly, except violent ones. This conflict reached into every corner of his life. It shaped a paradoxical figured haunted by catastrophic visions of libido on the loose, who rejoiced in his power yet suffered from paralyzing stage fright, who created erotic cynosures only to destroy them, who kept himself hidden while craving love. But the outsider locked outside himself was already present at twelve. "My years in *collège* were a time of tears," says the hero of his strongly autobiographical novel, *La Confession de Claude*. "I had in me the pride of loving natures. I was not loved because I was not known and I refused to make myself known." One witness remembered him as "the stubbornly unsocial, melancholy sort other kids detest."

What saved Emile from the plight of his tearful character, Claude, was the friendship that sprang up, soon after he arrived at the Collège Bourbon, between himself and a large, ungainly boy fourteen months older than he named Paul Cézanne, who was quick to detect a kindred spirit in the pariah everyone else thought ridiculous for speaking Parisian French. "Opposed by nature, but drawn to each other by secret affinities, by the throes of a common ambition, by the awakening in them of a superior intelligence for which the mob of dunces regularly thrashed them," Zola would write in *L'Oeuvre* of two boys closely resembling Paul and himself, "they instantly formed a permanent bond." This vulnerable pair became a less vulnerable threesome when in due course they won the allegiance of another schoolmate, Jean-Baptistin Baille, whose parents ran a hotel on the Cours Sextius that catered to patrons of the bathing establishments next door.

Although all the afflictions that originated in François Zola's death encouraged Emile to feel peculiarly the victim of malign fate, his friendship with Paul Cézanne taught

1 It may also have furnished material for the novel *Thérèse Raquin*, where a "bestial" half-Algerian helps her equally bestial lover drown the mother's boy she married.

him that having a father, and even a rich father, could prove as onerous as losing one. Louis-Auguste Cézanne, who came from a long line of Provençal artisans, began his fortune in the felt-hat trade at Aix, where rabbits were far more numerous than people. After apprenticing with a Parisian hatter during the early 1820s, he joined two Aixois in business and soon established his reputation as a shrewd merchant for whom Guizot's commandment "*Enrichissez-vous!*" was worth the decalogue. Resentful of Aix's privileged class, he saw to it that doors shut against him should be double-bolted by declaring himself a Republican, but this exclusion did not affect the firm of Martin, Coupin and Cézanne, which had made its partners rich when they bade one another farewell in 1845. Three years later history vindicated Louis-Auguste. The failure of Aix's one bank in the economic debacle that attended the 1848 revolution gave him an opportunity to have his idle fortune work him up another fortune. With local entrepreneurs facing ruin for want of credit, the hat exporter became a financier and did inordinately well at it even before France's resurgence under Napoleon III.

Because, as a typical crotchet, he wore untanned leather boots to spare himself the expense and trouble of having them polished, some contemporaries saw in him a Père Grandet, and indeed, Louis-Auguste, like Balzac's character, held his family in a tight fist. Begrudging them title not only to his name and money but to civil dignity, he would not marry the woman by whom he had already sired two children until 1844, when Paul was five and his sister Marie was three. That this irregular ménage isolated them in a town whose inhabitants piously clucked over it served at once to justify his aversion for society and to reinforce his authority in the household. Every transaction with the outside world was closely monitored by him, and marriage inspired no essential reform, as one gathers from what is generally taken to be a portrayal of the Cézanne household in Zola's *La Conquête de Plassans*:

Marthe loved her husband with a sober unimpassioned love, but with her affection was mingled considerable fear of his jokes and pleasantries, his perpetual teasing. She was hurt, too, by his selfishness, and the loneliness in which he left her; she felt a vague grudge against him for the quietude in which she lived—that very manner of life she said made her happy. When she spoke of him, she said, "He is very good to us. You've heard him, I daresay, get angry at times, but that arises from his passion for seeing everything in order, which he often carries to an almost ridiculous extreme. He gets quite vexed if he sees a flower-pot a little out of place in the garden or a plaything lying about on the floor; but in other matters he does quite right in pleasing himself. I know he is not very popular, because he has managed to accumulate some money and still goes on doing a good stroke of business now and then; but he only laughs at what people say about him."

With his passion for order, getting the goods on those around him whether kin or client, came naturally to Louis-Auguste, and intercepting letters was one of the strategies he would employ.

Paul's delicate sensibility did not earn him high marks from Cézanne *père*. The earliest manifestations of it were greeted with such derision that he sought refuge near his mother, Elisabeth (born Aubert, curiously enough), a young woman capable of recognizing as worthwhile certain endeavors whose principal reward lay elsewhere than in the acquisition of money or power. Though she herself had not had any formal schooling, she nonetheless managed to blunt the edge of her husband's aggressive materialism. Paul grew up betwixt and between. "A quiet and docile student, he worked hard; he had a good mind, but did not reveal any remarkable qualities," his sister recalled. "He was criticized for his weakness of character; probably he allowed himself to be influenced too easily." Being unable, on the one hand, to square his mind with the values his father promoted and, on the other, to stop craving legitimation, he could do

nothing to avoid Louis-Auguste's terrible barbs. Far more grievous than the social disrepute into which he found himself born was this sense of internecine failure, which would urge him before long to make repeated, foredoomed, and humiliating overtures to the Salon jury. Submission followed by rage then by self-doubt became his lifelong itinerary, so that every departure from Aix ended with him coming home again, like a prisoner travelling at the end of a rope, to collect his allowance and to lay his unsuccessful before Louis-Auguste, as if in hostile tribute. "Cézanne has many spells of discouragement. Despite the scorn he affects for glory, I see that he desires to succeed. When he does badly, he speaks of nothing less than of returning to Aix and making himself a clerk in a commercial house," Zola would observe in 1861, during Cézanne's first such venture abroad. Zola would also have occasion to note, early in their friendship, how quickly the impressionable stuff of which Paul was made could harden under criticism, and form a shell. Indeed, around his "faults" he built his most durable defenses. His dishevelment, for example, brought him frequent reprimands, but unkempt he remained, and the mess a painter makes may have been for him a secretly compelling attraction of his trade.

Paul and Emile found little understanding among those men who taught them at the Collège Bourbon. Both boys demonstrated enough facility within the classical curriculum, winning highest honors—Paul in Latin, Emile in French narration—that it would perhaps have required a sharp eye to see them as desperately wanting emotional support, and the typical high school teacher in Second Empire France was not recruited on the basis of his discernment. "[Masters] taught four hours a day and had no other relationship with the students," wrote Zola. Whatever he thought and observed outside school, during those four hours, for which the state paid him meager wages, the master was to be as anachronistic as a Roman grammaticus, with the inevitable result that many of them, unless they could manage a

double life, lost either their intellectual curiosity or their livelihood. "In the provinces the intellectual level of masters is rather low," Zola went on to say in the late 1870s, when such issues were publicly discussed.

They drift along in the classical routine and know nothing beyond it. The machine functions and it works today because it worked yesterday . . . [My masters] had gone grey repeating their own knowledge and they instructed us in much the same way I imagine our grandfathers had been taught. Wandering in their heads were three or four ideas on which they made do from October to July. Immured in their little town, they hardly knew what was happening outside . . . For all that, the ones I recall were remarkable men who cannot be faulted for the narrowness of their horizon and their blind submission to programs.

Had blame been fairly apportioned, the major share would have fallen on a system that made them regard themselves as clocklike agents of central authority, for when they strayed from a curriculum devised by functionaries who seemed to believe that school should keep young minds ignorant of the modern world, and the teacher ignorant of young minds, an inspector called them to account. In consequence of this, wrote Zola, they acquired, especially in the provinces, the ponderous deportment of people who turn everlastingly in the same circle, "like horses at a riding academy." Resentment at having been buried in a remote province or hypersensitivity born of the ingratitude children showed them for the task they performed gave a distinctive coloration to those whom Zola could recall. "[One master] nursed a mortal grudge against me because one day, when I hadn't learned my Greek grammar lesson, I dared explain to him, with a schoolboy's candor, that Greek served no purpose in life. I'm not sure where that came from, but our pedagogue was in high dudgeon and persecuted me all year long for my unfortunate reflection."

Since his unfortunate reflection ran coun-

ter to dogma around which the bourgeoisie chose to groom its young, Emile received condign punishment. The more acquisitive and mobile French society became, the more anxiously did the *haute-bourgeoisie* insist on classical humanities as a prerequisite for admission to the cultural body politic. Thus we find Louis Napoleon's minister of education, Hippolyte Fortoul, declaring in the early 1850s that "the explication of Latin and Greek authors, on which our literary studies are based, remains the essential part of classwork; to it must be devoted every moment one can shave off other exercises." Never had it seemed more urgent than during the aftermath of revolution, when Bonapartist parvenus joined forces with an older establishment against "socialism," to enforce this pedagogical strategy, whose *raison d'être* derived in some degree from its very hermeticism.

The inspector general—an unusually enlightened one—who wrote in the 1850s that a physics course given at the Collège Bourbon "sins on the experimental side, owing partly to the want of scientific collections" corroborated Zola's memory of having been educated under a regime in which masters honored the precept that education would not deserve its name if it addressed material realities too familiarly. A wedge was driven there, and the same wedge that kept them aloof from nature served to discourage them from holding conversation with a baser or intimate self. Hence the importance of oratorical exercises modeled after the Roman progymnasmata, which had students imitate "great men" the better to have them recover from childhood, rather as in those courtly plays staged at insane asylums by eighteenth-century alienists the lunatic performed elevated roles on the theory that such mimetism could render him whole again. Ancient Rome furnished most of the exemplars, but even exemplars sometimes fell short of themselves, so that schoolmen had recourse to *excerpta* or skirted trouble altogether by producing texts such as *De viris illustribus*, which conveyed a certain ideal of classical virtue more exactly than the genuine litera-

ture. When they trained their high-mindedness on French, what came of it was a syllabus containing no work written before the seventeenth century or since the eighteenth. For his baccalaureat examination Emile would need only Bossuet, Fénelon, Massillon, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Corneille, Racine, Boileau, and La Fontaine, and nothing by these authors that the Ministry of Public Instruction deemed risqué. Thus, pious regard for the classics did not extend to Racine's profane theater, to Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, to Voltaire's philosophical tales.

In Paris, a boy could hardly walk to the *lycée* (or, if he boarded there, escape for a day) without having images of the modern world imprinted on his mind. His counterpart found something quite different at Aix where, after Louis Napoleon's *coup d'état*, which had excited rebellion in villages throughout that region, a gerontocracy pettifogging under cover of civic idealism administered municipal business as if it were Latin class. How matters stood may be judged from the address delivered by Mayor Rigaud in honor of Louis Napoleon, whose state visit on September 29, 1852, occasioned a one-hundred-and-one-gun salute, general cries of *Vive l'empereur*, and a spectacle of medieval pageantry that must have made some considerable impression on Emile, newly enrolled at the Collège Bourbon. "The city of Aix, which you deign to visit, was formerly the capital of Provence, the abode of a king, and the fatherland of valiant knights and troubadors," Rigaud declared when a Provençal drum corps had finished taboring its rendition of *Partant pour la Syrie*.² "Having fallen from its former splendor, it consoled itself with scholarship and love for arts and letters. It remained all the while faithful to the ideas of order, of authority, and of power. Prince, today you are the representative of these ideas in France; the national will has on two solemn

2 A jingling tune composed by Louis Napoleon's mother, Queen Hortense, and played as a national anthem on all imperial occasions.

occasions summoned you to the government of the country. We are happy to have maintained these fine feelings in our heart so as to lay them at your feet in tribute." The *Mémorial d'Aix* quoted this speech as evidence that Aix, if it could not rival Marseille in the opulence of its salutation, welcomed the Prince-President with greater "calm" and "dignity."

Dignity prevented Mayor Rigaud from reminding his honored guest that Aix's eclipse had been hastened during the regime of Napoleon I, when an ex-Jacobin prefect named Delacroix, who denounced Aix as "the Coblenz of the Midi" (i.e., a refuge for aristocrats) betook himself to Marseille, prefecture and all. But Rigaud was also mindful of the fact that in his aristocratic phase Napoleon curried favor with Aix by restoring to it the high court it lost after the dissolution of its Parlement in 1789. Sooner than risk another such loss—for rulers could take away what rulers gave, and the city relied on its judicial function as much as any company town on its mine or mill—Aixois made "order" a watchword. Louis Napoleon had nothing to fear from this quarter, which behaved so obsequiously that even the prudent *Mémorial d'Aix* called attention to it on February 3, 1856, in an article whose author lamented: "If one wished to depict with exactitude its spiritual state, our city could fairly be compared to a dead sea where the tide of public spirit flows quiet beneath a leaden atmosphere that constricts blood vessels and dampens the will."

The poet Frédéric Mistral claimed that behind closed doors, in the great mansions they had bought from ruined nobles, Aix's dynasts led a spirited social life, with balls and musicales and meetings of various "cercles" organized around professional interest or political persuasion. Those who did not belong, however, tended to feel about Aix as Guizot had in 1837, when he observed that patrons of the thermal establishment, while curing their physical ills, fell ill of boredom. Prévost-Paradol, the future academician whose distinguished career in letters included a brief stint at Aix's Faculté des

Lettres during the 1850s, after he graduated from the Ecole Normale Supérieure, wrote to his friend Suckau in Paris: "You cannot imagine the forlorn aspect of this little town, its solitude, the decay of these great somber houses and these vast empty apartments." Such was its Lethe-like influence that the rejection of a manuscript, which would formerly have made him distraught, left him indifferent, and he could imagine himself being led down a "mossy path to extinction" in perfect numbness. On his successor at the Faculté des Lettres, J. J. Weiss, the anesthesia did not take effect quite so easily. "I have been in many cities, I have never seen any as difficult to get used to as this one," he wrote to Prévost-Paradol in 1857. "In your country house, on the pear tree where I am told you liked to perch, you were not, so to speak, in Aix. The real Aix is no. 20 rue Villeverte, and nowhere outside Mazas [a prison in Paris] can being be so dreary! I shall resign myself, but it will require mighty resignation or potent laziness." Had it been some other city, Weiss might have forgiven Aix's theater the dirty white walls that put Prévost-Paradol in mind of an assizes court and the "Choral Society of Apollo" its off-pitch crooning and the backwardness of an old dame who, to make ends meet, sold eggs from poultry in the garden of her eighteenth-century townhouse, where she lived among valuable antiques. As it was, they seemed so much of a piece with the general decrepitude that he could only wish himself gone from what he called "this mausoleum" of the *ancien régime*.

Zola's recollections imply that during adolescence, in the shadow cast by François Zola's tombstone, which stood on a rise just beyond his school, he, too, found Aix inhospitable to the living. Life went on, of course, and those recollections sometimes, almost apologetically, yield a vignette that shows Emile as a boy doing what normal boys did if they grew up in provincial France. But the images Zola drew in his fiction and essays are overwhelmingly images of confinement or exile. Grass pushing up between the cobblestones, guards double-locking the

massive wooden gates at 10:00 P.M. in winter and at 11 in summer, barricaded mansions, parish bells stirring the drowsy air every half-hour all evoke a moribund town where even the church stood on its last legs. To witness the *Fête-Dieu*, which featured a procession of citizens in the high, pointed hoods of medieval penitents, was to see “a lame Catholicism dragging itself beneath the blue heaven of old beliefs.” And nothing had replaced it, no faith or idea that could hoist men above the belfries and alert them to some new horizon. “Of course one finds serious students who read the papers and new books, and wax enthusiastic over new ideas, but they are so utterly lost in the crowd that one must consider them anomalous,” Zola wrote in later years. “I speak here about the majority and this majority wallow satisfied in complete ignorance: no reading, no literary or philosophical passions, no interest in the ideas that preoccupy the modern world.”

The ache of confinement begot rich fantasies of escape, so that any nomad for whom Aix was just one more way station on the road to distant climes might serve as his Pied Piper. Gypsies first of all. They lived in wagons near the impasse Sylvacanne outside town and Emile, though tales he had heard warned against visiting their encampment, felt a lure compounded of dread, recalcitrance, and fascination with the exotic women who kindled dreams that intramural life did not admit. “I saw ravishingly beautiful creatures there,” he wrote in an autobiographical section of *Nouveaux contes à Ninon*. “We young scamps who didn’t share the revulsion of proper folk would peek into the caravans where these people sleep during the winter, and I remember that one day, when my heart was heavy with some school-boy grief, I dreamed of climbing into one of those departing wagons, of going off with those tall, beautiful girls whose black eyes scared me, of going far away, to the end of the earth, rolling forever along highways.” Highways brought another nomadic breed in the soldier, and beginning in 1854 sol-

diers filed through en route to Marseille and thence by ship to the Crimea. While peacetime traffic went around Aix, war offered it a grandstand view of the splendid army on whose exploits against Russia Louis-Napoleon counted to legitimize his reign. In fact most Aixois found this spectacle objectionable, for even if the government had not required as the price of admission that each citizen billet a man or two, regiments mustering at dawn cost them sleep. Lost sleep did not greatly trouble the young, however, and by 4 A.M. youths would have lined up along the Cours to watch a breathtaking sequence of cuirassiers, lancers, hussards, and dragoons. With the drumroll, they, too, moved forward, they including Emile, who had ceased to be a boarder after his first year at the Collège Bourbon. “We’d follow them on the wide, white roads,” Zola wrote. “I remember walking for miles. We’d march in rhythm, our books cinched to our backs like cartridge-pouches. We weren’t supposed to accompany the soldiers beyond the gunpowder magazine, but we’d trespass as far as the bridge, then up a slope, then on to the next village.”

Before long Emile would no longer need the licence of patriotic fervor to venture abroad. As they reached mid-adolescence, he, Paul Cézanne, and Jean-Baptistin Baille, whom schoolmates dubbed “the inseparables,” consolidated their threesome in excursions that saw them go hiking through the countryside or, during the summer, bathe nude in the Arc river where it meandered under dense foliage south of town. “These were flights far from the world, an instinctive absorption in the kindly bosom of nature, an unreasoning act of worship of trees, water, mountains which purchased us the boundless joy of being alone and free,” he wrote in *L’Oeuvre*. The wild terrain François Zola had once surveyed became the playground in which Emile staked out his own claim on the world. Five miles up the Bibemus road and high above Aix he could encompass it all: an immense sky with sunlight glinting off the ferrous-red earth from which stone for Aix’s mansions had been

quarried, pine trees braced in grotesque postures against the Mistral, chalk hills cupping a lake formed by the dam that finally stood complete eight years after its architect's death, and the dam itself, spanning a cleft known as the Infernets gorge. Bibemus was one of their favorite itineraries. Another, to the south, took them along the route du Tholonet as far as a lovely hamlet of that name where they would pause for lunch and then resume their whimsical course down gullies or over the low walls that crisscrossed sheep meadows. When game season came, they packed guns, though no one among them could shoot straight and least of all Emile, who discovered at sixteen from not being able to read public notices how myopic he was. Their pleasure lay rather in the romp through lavender and gorse and thyme, in the expectant quiet of the hunter's blind, the crunch of chalk dust underfoot, in mutton roasted on a spit, in the poems unfit for academic consumption of Hugo and Musset, which they heard themselves declaim to one another, subversively. Night would often have overtaken them before they saw Aix again and reduced to a spectral presence Mont Sainte-Victoire, the great crop of which kept constant watch over the vagabonds, aligning and crowning every point of view.

Several decades later, when Zola had written novels that exhale nostalgia for the Provençal *garrigue* and Cézanne was hauling his easel and colors up Bibemus road all year round in an obsessive tête-à-tête with the mountain. One could better appreciate the importance their peregrinations had had. Nature helped them feel good about themselves as they shook off the image of misfits to cultivate a sense of their grandiose singularity. Once the city disappeared, so for the time being did humiliations and problems that lurked therein. "With every return, [we succumbed to] the delicious vacancy of fatigue, a triumphant boastfulness over having walked farther than the previous time, the rapture of feeling carried forward by [our] momentum and by the brisk cadence of some fierce soldiers' song, which rocked

[us] as in the depths of a dream" was how Zola remembered this virile camaraderie. No doubt the experience did mobilize some unconscious or half-conscious fantasy to the extent that it derived its power from associations with the soldier-engineer in whose footsteps he felt himself "carried forward," like a sleepwalker. It's as if two fathers with discrete spheres of influence inhabited Emile, one holding him back, the other rallying him on, one emblemizing his frailty, the other being a kind of demiurge who made him vigorous. Which would gain the upper hand at any given moment was nothing he could safely predict, but his memoirs suggest that during such rambles the future *chef de bande* began to assert himself. He celebrated friendship, he nattered about life, he read his own verse, he defended dreams and had enough energy left over to support the weak-kneed Paul when hopelessness overwhelmed him, or when what Zola called "the evil demon" lay hold of him. "When he hurts you, you must not blame his heart, but rather the evil demon that clouds his thought," Zola would caution Baille. "He has a heart of gold and is a friend who can understand us, for he is just as mad as we, and just as much a dreamer." So completely had their initial roles been reversed that Paul, standing head and shoulders taller than Emile, behaved like his silent shadow.

Paul's cruel outbursts proclaimed, among other things, his exasperation with the authority he himself vested in Emile, and for once he was seconded by Louis-Auguste, who didn't want rivals. Emile, in turn, used this authority to redress the balance between Paul's material ease, which might otherwise have galled him, and his own humble circumstances. "Brotherhood," as they described their friendship, was a commotion of the sublime and the unavowable. It often saw them cleave together until dawn feverishly sorting through ideas for some one eternal verity that would put everything right in "an infallible and complete religion." It also armed them against fears neither could cope with alone, and particu-

larly the fear of women. "Timid and maladroit, they banned woman herself [from their jaunts] and made their flaws out to be an austere virtue that marked them as superior," wrote Zola in *L'Oeuvre*. "For two years Claude was consumed with love for a milliner's apprentice, whom he trailed every evening and never had the courage to address. Sandoz nurtured dreams, women met on a journey, beautiful girls who would suddenly materialize in an unknown wood, yield themselves for the whole day, then dissipate at twilight like shadows." When, in manhood, Paul developed the phobias of a recluse—not suffering himself to be touched and shrinking back from nude female models—it became obvious that his pent-up instincts had wrought greater havoc than Emile's, but during adolescence shy was shy. The same woods offered them refuge; the same stream and bed of hot sand appeased yearnings that their schoolmates contrived to satisfy with a maid, at a brothel, or alone. Emile as well as Paul might have modeled for the lovelorn youngster adoring the milliner's apprentice from afar and, indeed, clues indicate that at sixteen or seventeen Emile was smitten by a dark-haired girl named Louise Solari, who would never know what reveries had once been embroidered around her barely nubile person unless, years after the fact, she recognized someone very like herself in *La Fortune des Rougon*.

Whether he discovered modern verse extracurricularly or through a young teacher from Paris whose acknowledgment of the Romantic movement earned him a *succès de scandale* at the Collège Bourbon, Hugo and Musset came to walk beside Emile as third and fourth companions. "We didn't amble alone. We had books in our pockets or in our game-bags. For one entire year, Victor Hugo held absolute sway over us." The idea fathered on nineteenth-century schoolboys that French literature was a classical tirade silenced by the 1789 revolution kept Hugo young beyond his age, or at any rate kept his oldest poetry from going stale in the syllabus alongside consecrated texts. *Les Orien-*

tales and *Feuilles d'automne* had been written a generation earlier, but when high-strung children who were tuned for Boileau first heard such poems as "Les Djinnns," "Mazeppe," and "Lord Byron en 1811," they felt themselves vibrate to some new diapason. Hugo's language promoted the thrill of heights they sought outside Aix and it must have stirred them to read:

Chaque homme, dans son coeur, crée à sa
fantaisie
Tout un monde enchanté d'art et de poésie.
C'est notre Chanaan que nous voyons d'en
haut.
Restons où nous voyons. Pourquoi vouloir
descendre
Et toucher ce qu'on rêve, et marcher dans la
cendre?³

These lines echo Hugo's preface to *Les Orientales*, where "good taste" of the kind that sanctions only "beautiful literature drawn with a chalk-line" is brought up on charges of having tyrannized the artistic imagination. Here was a *parti pris* Emile found altogether congenial.

Despite this, Hugo inspired nothing like as much affection as Alfred de Musset. While he may have offered them a lofty view, the Pelion on Ossa of Hugo's rhetoric proved somewhat daunting to young men beset with anxieties that usually made them feel unqualified for an heroic role in life, if not for life itself. "We were born to literary consciousness after the December *coup d'état* and knew about the battles of 1830 at second hand, through stories told us by our elders," wrote Zola in 1879, just before he issued a naturalist manifesto the effect of which was to carry the war against good taste beyond territory that Hugo's generation had conquered. "All that romantic heat

3 "In his heart every man creates as he fancies/A whole enchanted world of art and poetry./It is our Canaan we see from on high/Let us keep our vantage point. Why should one wish to descend/And touch one's dream, and walk in ashes?" From "A mes amis L.B. et S.B."

had blown away and the exiled Hugo stood on a distant pedestal . . . We couldn't have said why his verse did not move us as deeply as Musset's, but the mountainous rhetoric was already chilling us and Musset won our allegiance because the rhetorician in him doesn't obtrude; he goes straight to the nerves."

Victor Hugo on his distant pedestal in Guernsey was not yet the literary patriarch against whom Zola would measure himself at forty but a surrogate for the Olympian father whose death cast him adrift in time. Small, doubtful, anachronistic is how Emile felt vis-à-vis the previous generation and Musset understood better than anyone these sequela of orphanhood. In "Namouna," "Rolla," "Les Nuits" Emile found poetry scaled to his belief that a world from which great lungs had sucked up so much oxygen could sustain only neurasthenic, self-conscious forms of life. Musset's waifs bantering while they weep and mourning religious faith by debauching themselves among its bare, ruined choirs, or committing suicide after one last quip, spoke to him as Laforgue's Pierrot would speak to *fin-de-siècle* sensibilities. Where nothing seemed quite real except Mammon, consolation lay in arch parodies and quixotic shadow games that conferred a kind of elegance on adolescent despair. "We adored medieval decor, philtres, and sword thrusts: but we especially adored them in Musset's limber style, with its scepticism and mocking overtones," recalled Zola, who could not have enough of melodrama or of the Middle Ages, and who set out to write a romance about the Crusades. "We enthused over this ballad to the moon because it was for us the gauntlet a superior poet had thrown down at romantics as well as classics, the guffaw of an independent spirit in whom our entire generation recognized a brother." This guffaw, which one might better describe as a stage laugh, resounds mirthlessly through the verse letters Paul would soon be writing Emile. It helped them, in their antic mood, make light of pain and keep the unruly self at a safe distance.

For under certain circumstances, Emile's self ran amock. Beginning in childhood, he developed a terror of thunderstorms, for example, and more than once friends saw him shake uncontrollably as lightning flashed overhead. Obsessed with death, he relied on superstitious ceremonies to avert danger, which lay everywhere about him. In adolescence, this obsession was not yet the full-blown tyrant it became years later, when he couldn't enter his study without first touching a particular tabletop, or hail a cab without assuring himself that its licence number augured well, or encounter a funeral procession without taking it to be a black omen. Indeed, the sensible boy evoked by Paul Alexis in *Notes d'un ami* is remarkably unlike the writer whose fanatical orderliness would gird him against the unforeseen. "I have often spoken about [his youth] with him, his mother, his former schoolmates," wrote Alexis. "He was neither indolent nor given to swotting himself dizzy over books. An intelligent and practical boy . . . who, no sooner in the study hall or back at home, made for his desk, lost no time, courageously undertook his assignments, simplifying them as much as possible, and halted only when the task was done. Only then did he feel free and took full advantage of his freedom. In short, no excess of zeal, nothing except the indispensable and the necessary." But inside the sensible boy was another whose burden of guilt and fear of punishment had already seen him create for himself a rich demonology, which fed on melodrama. It was not the sensible boy who regularly went to Aix's theater and sat enthralled by the hokum that road companies served up there, or who devoured the novels of Eugène Sue and Dumas and Emmanuel Gonzalès and Paul Féval. It was his imaginative alter ego, who feared that one misstep would send him over the edge, into an abyss crackling with hellfire.

Emilie Zola encouraged such tendencies toward the melodramatic, as one gathers from a letter her son wrote to her on April 13, 1856. Having joined several classmates in a minor rumpus at the Collège Bourbon,

he was singled out for punishment by the headmaster, and the headmaster announced that Madame Zola would duly receive a report of his misconduct. Emile softened the impending blow as best he could. It had been during a "lapse" in his thoughts about her that he went astray, he wrote, and with much breast-beating he vowed to make filial piety his infallible guide. Having often been told that he was her "only consolation," he would prove himself "worthy" of the part she assigned him. Although misconduct sometimes had dramatic consequences under a regime that did not gladly suffer insubordination, his reiterated pledges of fidelity say more about the emotional climate Emilie fostered at home than about harsh discipline at school. She hovered over her son half awaiting a sign that nature had made him in the same breakable mold as her husband. It was incumbent on him to dispel such fears and the grief Emile imagined would pour out when his headmaster's note reached her suggests how large they loomed. Equally large was his own fear of some untoward event severing the only bond that kept him from falling into oblivion. Each constantly reassured the other, yet neither felt reassured and Emile's vow to "efface everything," to make Emilie "forget everything" spoke against his deep knowledge that nothing he did could finally dry the tears shed by his *mater dolorosa*, or wipe clean the slate. A death having occurred, death married them both to hysteria. For Emile, it prepared ambushes, it loosed lightning bolts, it filled the world with consternation. Emilie, in turn, had nervous fits during which her memory fled and her throat became a ball of knotted muscle.

Dared he succeed where François had failed? Dared he not? His quandary must have been more acute than usual in 1856, on the eve of a momentous decision he would face whether to take a classical degree after the fourth form or work toward a scientific baccalaureat. (That the choice existed at all was itself remarkable. Until 1852 plans for abolishing the integrated curriculum had

consistently been beaten back by conservative opinion, which saw them as Trojan horses devised to unleash upon France a utilitarian spirit incompatible with the national "genius.") Unlike many children, Emile kept faith with family tradition in choosing science. However tedious he found the study of classical languages, abandoning Greek when defectors were generally urged to consider themselves second-rate would have been more difficult had he not felt that filial piety endorsed his decision. "[Scientific education] is the seed of our future strength," he wrote twenty-two years later, and no doubt some such argument began to grow on him long before it reached maturity as this patriotic dictum. By the third form, Emile, who had after all sprung from François Zola's "seed," may already have been formulating around "science," "seed," and "future strength" an hereditary imperative that ghosted for the paternal wisdom he didn't enjoy. Even if other factors had not swayed him, there was the all-important promise of manhood, which inevitably came bound up with his idealized image of the father-scientist. Indeed, everything suggests that an oblique line led from the decision he made at this juncture—or the thinking behind it—to the grand finale of *Les Rougon-Macquart*, where Doctor Pascal, whose scientific notes have been wantonly destroyed, sires a son *in articulo mortis*.

Emilie, who was not demure by nature, held some view in the matter, but what view is moot, for Zola never discussed it and evidence makes equally plausible the notion of a reverent widow encouraging her son to follow François Zola and of an ambitious plaintiff wanting him to get the *baccalauréat-ès-lettres* for a career in public administration or law. Emile himself juggled these alternatives, even after he had presumably let one of them drop. "I want to do law; since a career one must have, the law is one I can happily square with my intellectual disposition," he told Baille in 1859. At any rate, his family's plight would require him to do something more gainful than write poetry. How desperate that plight was may be inferred from

a lease drawn up on November 28, 1855, between Emilie's confederate, Marius Daime, who had a baker's oven available for rent near the flour mill he owned in Aix, and Louis-Etienne Aubert, Emilie's father, who at seventy-two still possessed enough strength to knead dough, if not enough to start painting houses again. As her slender resources dwindled, Emilie found ever cheaper accommodations. From the flat on the rue Bellegarde she moved to a small house on the rue Roux-Alpheran, near the Collège Bourbon. In 1855 another move saw her and her parents establish residence on the Cours des Minimes in a working-class neighborhood just outside the old quarter of Aix. Two years later, they moved again, this time into two rooms facing the "barri" or alley that ran alongside the city wall.

On October 16, 1857, Emilie suddenly lost her mother, Henriette Aubert, who had made herself indispensable since François Zola's death ten years before. With destitution now a very real prospect, Emilie went back to Paris, where men of influence such as Alexandre Labot would, she hoped, be disposed to help her. Certainly Aix was not. The municipal council denied her request that it pension the widow of a man it sometimes still praised for his benefactions.

Emile's circle of friends, which included Cézanne, Baille, Philippe Solari, Marius Roux, and Louis Marguery, the son of a lawyer, did their best to fill out his shrunken

world. They huddled around him as he waited through the Christmas holidays together with Louis-Etienne, and entered the new year wondering what the future held in store. Weeks more passed before a letter finally arrived from Emilie. It did not announce the date of her return but informed him instead that there would be no return. Emile was told to raise money for third-class railway tickets by selling the furniture they had not already pawned and to join her as quickly as possible.

Paul, Jean-Baptistin, and Emile met for the last time in a large room cluttered with schoolboy paraphernalia where they had spent many agreeable hours talking and rhyming three-act comedies and performing chemical experiments. They also planned excursions of farewell up the Bibemus road and along the wind-swept route du Tholonet. Imagining life apart from one another made them choke, but it was agreed that Emile should consider himself a *prodromus* rather than an exile, in whose footsteps they would follow sooner or later. Without fail, they would reassemble some day on the Left Bank, and no doubt the thought of their reunion kept Emile warm when, in February 1858, he and his grandfather boarded a train for the long, uncomfortable journey to the capital, which was still shaking from bombs that had recently exploded around the imperial carriage as it drew up before the Opera House.

Van Gogh at the Met

by Jed Perl

For the modern New Yorker, Van Gogh's world offers none of the pleasant shock of recognition we know from Manet and Renoir and Seurat. "Van Gogh in Arles," the exhibition currently on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art,¹ is not a beguiling spectacle; in the South of France, Van Gogh does not take the part of the city dweller on vacation in the country. Arriving in the South from Paris—where he had spent the past two years living with his brother Theo—Van Gogh, who always felt happier in a rural setting, dives so completely into the place as to make us feel that he is a native. While painting the members of the Roulin family, he writes to Theo that he is a bit like a family doctor, on familiar terms with a whole clan. Though Van Gogh's Arles paintings have the perfume of the South, you can spend hours at "Van Gogh in Arles" without being particularly conscious that the artist is at the edge of the Mediterranean, in a world steeped in Roman culture. Van Gogh seems utterly uninterested in the Roman antiquities; he is not a tourist, and when he does write of the place in a detached way he talks of it as a fictional

land—the Japan of the woodblock prints.

Van Gogh had taken the great Parisian bath. He spoke, in a letter from Arles, of "living in the full tide of civilization, of Paris, of the arts," and even on the morning of his departure for Arles he had visited a studio—Seurat's. Still, Van Gogh's culture—his sense of himself in the world—was not urban, but pre-urban, pre-industrial, grounded in his sense of a man's relation to the earth and his neighbors: an older European idea of human experience. There was some of this as well in Cézanne—in the late portrait of his gardener Vallier—but Cézanne never had Van Gogh's old-fashioned reverence for the singular facts of the world. The fascination with an earlier or more primitive human order was part of what Van Gogh shared with Emile Bernard and Gauguin. With them, though, sentiment was often separated from sentimentality by nothing but a carefully arranged modern pose. Van Gogh understood that you cannot stylize sentiment and keep it pure. With Van Gogh, being a great modern painter never comes between him and the subject. Though as preoccupied with questions of style as any painter who ever lived, Van Gogh often approached his subjects as if he had no preconceptions at all.

At "Van Gogh in Arles" I felt sometimes almost embarrassed by the directness of Van Gogh's approach. Some of the drawings, such as the great panoramic views of fields done from Montmajour in July, 1888, seem

1 "Van Gogh in Arles" can be seen at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York until December 13. The exhibition's curator is Donald Pickvance, professor of art at the University of Glasgow; the catalogue, *Van Gogh in Arles*, was published by the Metropolitan and Harry N. Abrams: 272 pages, \$24.50.

like simple declarations of affection: "I love this place." And many of the paintings just tell the truth: "I will now show you what the odd thatched cottages at Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer look like." Van Gogh never makes fetishes of his objects: *Van Gogh's Bedroom* is the most unaffected of paintings. Standing close to it, you feel not so much its great design as the voice of the artist saying, "In my bedroom there is this and this and this . . ."—a catalogue of things, as if out of an old account book. The two portraits of Armand Roulin, the sixteen-year-old son of the postmaster, are suffused with an empathy that must owe more than a bit to Van Gogh's powerful sense of brotherly ties. Here Van Gogh begins to break through to a Rembrandtesque vision of portraiture: the adolescent uncertainty of Armand's eyes recalls the eyes of Rembrandt's portraits of his son Titus. Out of the stark, flat-colored backgrounds of the Armand portraits shine forth visages both lovely and tragic, strong in their forms, yet touched with a quality of melancholy.

In the Arles paintings, the complementary colors—blue and yellow, red and green—clang against one another like bells. These hues, painted in great, flat shapes or worked into the modeling of faces, signal the liberation of color from nature—and yet one is always brought back to nature. At the center of the opaque, playing-card-like arrangement of blue, green, and yellow in *L'Arlésienne: Madame Ginoux* is a unique, stubborn face. Madame Ginoux seems to be fighting her way out of the picture. The paintings Van Gogh did after Arles come more near resolving everything into art; at Arles Van Gogh will not yet equate style—the subjective—with truth. The work is done in a spirit of affirmation of the natural world. Van Gogh's colors, which he often spoke of in terms of "scales," climb toward the golden sun.

There is much that is deeply traditional in the great art of the late nineteenth century. Van Gogh, Seurat, and Cézanne each labored to reinstate an idea that early Impres-

sionism, with its insistence on the direct, unreconstructed experience of nature, had to some extent undone: the classical ideal of the picture as a self-contained, logically consistent analogue of the natural world. Monet and Renoir returned in their later work to a more self-contained idea of the picture, and Renoir became the first modern artist to demonstrate that aesthetic revolution did not prevent an artist of sufficient genius from creating an authentic art out of older pictorial forms. (In this he foreshadows Picasso's Neoclassicism and Matisse in the 1920s.) But for the generation of the 1880s, Impressionism was too fresh to be completely passed over, and the strain of getting through Impressionism to a more traditional sense of composition, form, and meaning necessitated enormous readjustments in the way the artist went about making art and the public went about viewing it.

The generations of Courbet, Manet, and the Impressionists had expressed their expansive sense of the world by painting virtually everything; for Van Gogh, Seurat, and Cézanne in the 1880s the gathering crisis in pictorial art made the role of subject matter in painting increasingly unclear. Seurat painted the procession of modern life—the circus, the park, the boudoir—with so strong a sense of classical form as to make his images feel somewhat withdrawn, remote. Cézanne, by focusing on but a few subjects, made each of them function at least in part as an extension of the artist's psyche. The stable, monumental aspect that Cézanne and Seurat gave to their everyday motifs functioned as a counterweight to their increasingly fluent, unstable sense of form. The subject, unemphatic in itself, was thrust toward the viewer through the hyperbole of new ways of painting—pointillism, Cézanne's flat strokes; the piquancy of the picture rested in part in the way unexceptional things were revealed in a new light. This was one of the essential lessons Picasso and Braque were to learn from Cézanne: analytical Cubism wrings from nature's most modest façades—pitchers, glasses, guitars, newspapers—a classical order in which

jokes, paradoxes, disjunctures are muffled by an overall radiance of beige or silver chiaroscuro.

Cézanne, Seurat, and the Cubists viewed subject matter in somewhat classical terms: the subject should be treated in a way that is not too personal, too specific; it should point toward the universal and the immutable. For Van Gogh, any sort of detachment was impossible. At the same moment he was pressing through to a new pictorial language, he tangled with all the emotional and associative implications of realistic subject matter. At Arles, where the range of Van Gogh's subjects is greater than either before or after, the variety that came before his brush must have felt exhilarating. He revitalized the old subject categories, viewing them from new angles. Scenes are caught off-balance, in odd, unexpected perspectives; faces are placed flat out in the centers of paintings with a directness that abolishes dramatic distance. Van Gogh was assaulted by a barrage of images that he felt he must absorb into his art all at once, in much the way generous spirits take in the dizzying heterogeneity of life itself. Leaving the Van Gogh show, you may feel that Van Gogh's willingness to embrace life is infectious—that your sense of the world is more alive, more resonant than before: an odd shop-sign, a tradesman going about his business, or a cozy bit of greenery appears, suddenly, freshly significant.

Van Gogh demonstrates in his art an extraordinary range of feeling; he regards the world in a variety of ways. He has a taste for the exotic, picturesque aspect of the South of France that one feels in the portraits of the Zouave, in the paintings of indigenous architecture, and in the zest with which he attacks the brilliantly colored, folk-art look of the coaches in the *Tarascon Diligence*. In such works Van Gogh seems to be savoring the special flavor of the South as one might delight in the piquancy of Southern food. The exoticism of Arles, though, is seen within the context of day-to-day, lived experience. Indeed, at the Metropolitan the brilliantly colored *Tarascon Diligence* is hung

right next to Van Gogh's paintings of the iron *Trinquetaille Bridge* and the *Railroad Bridge*, grim, gray structures that signaled the new, more impersonal form of urban scene. (Industrialization was just reaching Arles in those years.) This social landscape is further enriched in the portraits, which are extraordinarily attentive to the net of conventions that define the individual. The images of postmaster Roulin in his uniform are perhaps more sensitive than any other works of the century to the importance of the profession in the life of the petite bourgeoisie. In the last portrait of Roulin included in "Van Gogh in Arles," the word "POSTES" on Roulin's hat becomes a central element in the composition—as much a sign of the real world as "JOURNAL" in a Braque or Picasso. The settled, resolute character of the portraits of Madame Roulin gives another side of the social picture, as do the sun-scorching face and hands of *Patience Escalier*, which Meyer Schapiro has called "the last realistic portrait of a peasant in the tradition of Western painting. It is perhaps also the only great portrait of a peasant."

Oil painting demands that the viewer enter into a dialectic between paint and what paint signifies—between substance and illusion. Vasari marveled at the way Titian's late paintings, chaotic from close up, fell into a perfect order from a certain distance, and since then it has been part of the viewer's job to find a proper viewing distance—a point from which all the elements of the painting, which you can appreciate separately close up, compose into a single, unified whole. Impressionism altered the terms of representation, but it still resulted in paintings that cohered from a distance where the viewer could take in the whole scene at once. It is really with Van Gogh, Seurat, and Cézanne that the viewer begins to be uncertain about where the painting ought to be seen from. Seurat's work must, at least in part, be looked at from close up, from two or three feet away, where you can feel the miracle of his dots and dashes of color converging into palpable forms. But even as you

regard a Seurat from close up, you want to move away (to perhaps five or six feet from one of the small landscapes) so as to see how the small elements compose into one of Seurat's grandly plotted designs. With Seurat, there is no single proper vantage point; you experience his ineffableness as you shift closer toward, further away from the picture in search of a completeness that is there but is constantly opposed to the anarchy of a fluid, atomized surface. Cézanne, especially in his last decade, leaves you with similar indecisions about your relation to the painting. There are parts of Cézanne's *Le Château Noir* in the Museum of Modern Art—the château itself, the dense foliage below—that only begin to feel fully dimensional when you get very close to the painting and study the relations of the planes of color one by one; yet the painting must also be taken in from a greater distance, where you lose this dimensionality but gain a sense of the overall design and the large spatial relations that Cézanne's design gives expression to.

The brushstroke had played a central role in Van Gogh's art from his first maturity, with *The Potato Eaters*, in 1885. In *The Potato Eaters*, the big, choppy brushstrokes sculpting the peasants' heads gave the impression that Van Gogh was willing his peasants into life. When Van Gogh went to Paris his encounter with the lighter, all-over stroke of Impressionism necessitated a temporary change in the quality of his own hand—a weakening in the force of the brush that accounted, in large measure, for the lowered intensity and less personal quality of some of the work of the Paris period. Paris was Van Gogh's last apprenticeship, and after the first spring in Arles, when he painted the flowering orchards in a still Impressionist way, he continued in a direction begun in the late Paris phase and reclaimed the large, emphatic brushstroke as a central element in his art. Now the sculptural quality which the brush gave to the forms in *The Potato Eaters* period was opposed to an idea of surface design derived in large measure from the study of Japanese prints: Van Gogh wanted to bring the subject close to the

viewer in a way both sculptural and planar. (This foreshadows a similar struggle between the sculptural and the planar that preoccupies Matisse and Picasso between 1905 and 1912.)

The importance of the Japanese print for Van Gogh at this stage in his development was immense—incalculable, really. Van Gogh was not the first artist to have looked closely at these images, but he does seem to have been the first to take very seriously the later, more brightly colored prints of Hiroshige and his generation. Van Gogh was probably the only painter of the time who actually copied the Japanese prints, and his oil paint copies—one of which, after a print by Kesai Eisen, is included in "Van Gogh in Arles" even though it was done in Paris—are extraordinary. Japanese art seems to have functioned for Van Gogh in much the way African art did for Picasso: Van Gogh extrapolated from the woodblock prints not the elegant graphism of so much Eastern-inspired art of the time but a vigorous design that electrifies the oil paint surface. Through his examination of the graphic techniques of the Hokusai sketchbooks, where dots, dashes and twirls of line are used to describe all kinds of natural forms, Van Gogh found a way to activate the entire surface. At Arles, the Hokusai influence moved Van Gogh to fill up the surfaces of his drawings with many short jots of the pen.

Seurat and Cézanne forced the viewer to the actual spot—arm's length from the canvas—where they had painted. They demanded that the viewer understand their reconstructions of the world through a close stroke-by-stroke observation of their painting processes. This is the case with Van Gogh as well. When you stand too far away from the Arles paintings their forceful designs become overpowering and tend to swamp the subjects. You may feel, from six or eight feet away, that the central impulse in *L'Arlésienne* or *Street in Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer* is something totally abstract—that the reality which Van Gogh invokes is merely a pretext. This was surely not Van Gogh's

intent. Only by standing close to the Arles paintings—and with some of the best, such as the portraits of Armand Roulin, the closer the better—do you become alive to the way the individual strokes of color break into the flat design and pull it out into the viewer's space. It is the stroke that makes the large color shapes in a picture like *Tarascon Diligence* breathe; it is the stroke that gives the organic logic.

The confluence in Van Gogh's art of an extreme unconventionality of style with a deep commitment to the immediate realities of the world does not seem to have struck him as strange. Van Gogh knew that his style was strong but he felt that it was right to his subject. Especially, though, during the Arles period, when Van Gogh had not yet learned to unite subject and style so fully as he did at Saint-Remy, we can often find ourselves somewhat mystified by the confluence of an intense care for faces, expressions, and social ambience with an equally powerful sense of abstract form. I know I am not the only visitor to "Van Gogh in Arles" who has at times found the images strangely inconclusive. Perhaps some of us have come to think, more than we imagine, of abstraction and representation as irreconcilable: we are unsettled by the idea of an artist who so evidently has the idea that he will remain true to what he sees—will, in fact, reveal it—by transforming it into a fabric of brilliantly unnatural color.

We may do well to keep in mind, when looking at those Van Gogh paintings that trouble us, the clear, powerful voice of his letters. In the letters, as in the paintings of the Arles period, Van Gogh does not begin with an effect or idea in mind so much as with the thought of being true, piece by piece, to what he feels or sees. The way Van Gogh's words—rather simple words—form a modest, evenly spaced procession and compose a picture of something he has felt or seen recalls the process by which, in the paintings and drawings, the strokes compose an image. An excerpt from a letter Van Gogh sent to Theo from London in 1876,

even before he had begun to paint, gives the flavor of his prose.

The suburbs of London have a peculiar charm, between the houses and gardens are open spots covered with grass and generally with a church or school or workhouse in the middle between the trees and shrubs, and it can be so beautiful there, when the sun is setting red in the thin evening mist.

Yesterday evening it was so, and afterwards I wished you could have seen those London streets when the twilight began to fall and the lamps were lit, and everybody went home; everything showed that it was Saturday night and in all that bustle there was peace, one felt the need of and the excitement at the approaching Sunday. Oh, those Sundays and all that is done and accomplished on those Sundays, it is such a comfort for those poor districts and crowded streets.

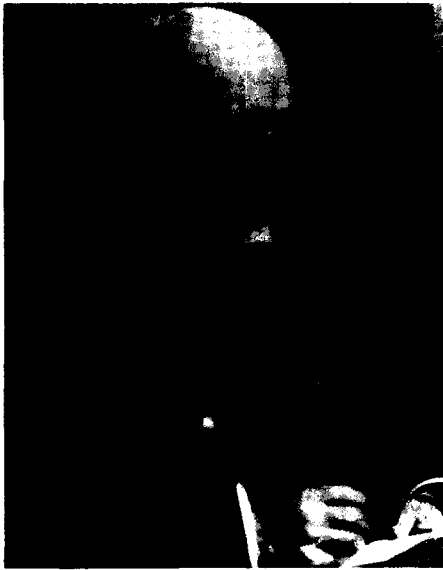
Note the extent to which Van Gogh keeps himself out of his description: it is about the people and their world.

Van Gogh during his time in Arles was the last great representative of the nineteenth-century realists' dream: the last to believe that art could be grounded in the everyday, social facts—the truths of the common world. He is in the tradition of Courbet, Millet, and the Barbizon painters, yet he seems closer to understanding some essential life principle than any nineteenth-century naturalist. Perhaps Van Gogh was less ideological than the naturalists: with Van Gogh life itself becomes the source of moral example, and the objects—the flowers, chairs, faces, fields—take on an authority unknown before in art.

Van Gogh's sense of the authority of nature is his most precious legacy to the twentieth century. To understand him as an Expressionist is a mistake, for distortion is not, really, what comes to mind in looking at his work: Van Gogh transforms things, but this is simply the way he realizes the essence of the object. With Van Gogh, the real mystery lies in how he manages so completely to avoid the anecdotal. If the unity of his late

work leads away from nature, it is toward a view of nature's coherence that is classical in much the way of late Cézanne. Van Gogh's lesson rests not in ways to transcend nature but in new methods for grabbing hold of nature. It is Van Gogh's example that lies behind the insistent presence of the objects in Matisse's *Red Studio*. He is there, everywhere, especially in the 1930s, in Picasso: in the way Picasso brings the emotions of his portrait subjects straight up to the surface. And it is Van Gogh's example that moves Braque, at the end of his life, after he has

finished his *Studio* series, to paint fields of golden wheat. I have been reminded, in looking at Van Gogh's pictures, of more recent works as well: the dark and exciting urban scenes of the contemporary English artists Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff seem to echo, in their brushwork, in their few, anonymous, rushing figures and their handling of space Van Gogh's *Trinquetaille Bridge* and *Railroad Bridge*. Artists are still going out to nature with the hope that the contingent, the everyday, will surprise them into new ideas of form.



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“Boardwalk”

by Herbert Morris

From what I remember of the light's angle,
of the sun, mornings, hammering our backs,
slamming our shoulders, playing on our faces,
surf on one side, horizon on the other,
we must be walking back to the hotel,
four of us, having, midway, made the turn
marking the farthest south we would advance.
Now we head north once more, the four of us,
Mother and Father at the center, I
next to Mother, my brother flanking Father,
I (even then) the one nearest the sea,
my brother, on the landward side, the farthest.
Mother holds my gloved hand in her gloved hand,
very gently, it seems, encourages me
to smile for the roving photographer
(clusters of whom, from seven on each morning,
patrol the boardwalk, one end to the other,
springing from nowhere when a family group
or a honeymoon couple has been sighted)
who has just now, just now, appeared before us,
materializing, it seems, from the sea,
promising a family portrait not merely
true-to-life but, should that be possible,
what might prove infinitely better: truer.
Mother and Father are, in time, persuaded;
they smile, my brother smiles, and I, encouraged
(though perhaps I would have done so regardless),
smile, too, that same half-squint, half-grin I wear now
when the sun slams too hard, or the light's glare
sets much too fierce a blaze, and light pours, pours,

blinding me a little (though it is blindness
I sought, and blindness, even now, I seek).

Father has slipped his arm beneath my brother's,
shyly, perhaps, yet not self-consciously,
a tenderness quite nearly inadvertent,
almost precisely counterbalancing
Mother's gesture in taking my gloved hand,
though Father's movement may be in response
to the sudden appearance of this young man
aiming his black machine at us, promising
something truer than the mere true-to-life:
fidelity, the real made much more so,
life, or four lives, made large as life, or larger,
because of what the lens would have us see—
an idea quite irresistible,
he thinks, to family groups (the four of us),
to young couples spending their honeymoons
watching the moon rise, hearing the waves break,
walking the boardwalk, back, and forth, and back,
until, at last, they turn to their hotels
(turn back, or turn again, or for the first time;
what shall matter is that they make the turn)
at some point farthest south from here, advancing,
and, in the dark, dream splendor in the turn.

Mother's coat, long and black, with a fox collar
from whose recesses her face now looks out,
pale flower framed by rings of jet-black petals,
is fastened with one button at the waist.
With the gloved hand not holding mine, she clutches
a small purse, also black, close to her chest.
Her cloche, black, too, has scallops of thin half-moons
cut delicately to ride on her forehead,
her dark hair visible at the right temple
where the brim of the cloche, seen slowly rising,
has been designed, one gathers, to reveal it.
Her shoes seem somehow splendid, though they seem
wholly unremarkable, too, at first glance,
at second glance, as well: thin, pointed tips
catching the light that showers us that day,
their balance, their proportion, sane and just,
undecorated, plain, above all quiet,

holding beautifully, it seems, to their ground,
Mother's ground, holding neither tentatively
nor tenaciously, leaving room between
for where she stands, or may decide to stand,
the secret lodged within them, should there be one,
Mother's secret, as well: simplicity
(disputably, we are the shoes we wear).

Father, beside her, grey on grey on grey,
wears a grey felt hat, grey trousers, grey spats,
and a form-fitting coat of darker grey.
The hat's brim throws deep shade across his eyes.
He wears a freshly starched shirt collar, white,
and a dark necktie in the center of which
two or three tiny diamonds of a stickpin
snare the light with each step that Father takes.
The hand closer to Mother (Father's right)
holds itself in check where the coat cuff ends,
the thumb gripped by the other fingers, hidden,
secreted in the palm, none of the fingers
extended, pointed down (some vast restraint
seems locked within that small gesture, some sense
of instinctive reserve), almost as though
Father does not yet quite know what to do
with that hand, with the fingers of that hand,
the one I have described as nearest Mother.
Dapper, stylish, meticulously groomed,
light lapping his dark grey, form-fitting coat,
his felt hat tipped at just the proper angle,
spats preserving the high shine on his shoes,
strolling with wife, with two sons, back and forth,
from one end of the boardwalk to the other,
diamonds lighting small fires in his necktie,
nests of shadows clustering in the folds
where, at mid-calf, mid-shin, his trousers break,
Father has the look of someone substantial.

My brother, the most difficult to fathom
(though I by no means claim ease with the others),
is, that winter, past ten, not yet eleven.
What can one say about a boy of ten?
I might describe apparel: his blue coat,
the scarf tucked in the collar, leather gloves.

I might mention his cap, his argyle socks,
the knickers showing from beneath his coat.
What, in any case, would you know of him
you would not know of any boy past ten
brought by his parents to the beach one Friday
for Father's birthday weekend late in winter?
I think my guess is that he would be elsewhere,
given the choice—I cannot say just where
(even strolling the boardwalk that day, he seems
in the process of drifting off, like smoke),
though I should add that nothing in the picture,
nothing I can quite specify, says that.
(If the picture were faded, streaked, showed age marks,
edges blistered, deformed, sections bleached out,
some faces (and lives with them) turning yellow,
too late to be retrieved, to be pulled back,
it is my brother I would have expected
to fade, to disappear before the eyes,
to bear whatever loss or devastation
the photograph had visited upon it,
my brother in whom damage would have spread,
in whom the most destruction would occur,
his figure, his, first, foremost, lashed, effaced).
Yet the feeling persists: that smile he smiles,
that look his eyes bear, even that half-shadow
cast by his cap across his brows, his forehead,
are all (and it lies in nothing apparent,
nothing the photographer caught that morning,
salt on the air, the wind up, the surf breaking,
search as I may, pursuing, lead by lead,
each likely (or unlikely) lead, all fruitless,
nothing, nothing whatever, one can hold to,
point to, identify, articulate,
hope to articulate) quite temporary,
wavering, failing, falling, giving way.

The pocket of my brother's coat we see,
the one so sharply outlined by the sun,
bulges with something it it (games?, a book?),
lending distortion to his silhouette;
with Father anchoring him to the boardwalk,
with all of us (I could not know it then)
somehow, each in his way, engaged, in secret,

in some last, futile, desperate attempt
to keep him here with us, here in the Thirties,
here on these pine-wood planks skirting the sea,
under light of a morning in late winter
assailing us all day, on all sides, full force,
making us squint, casting shadows, half-shadows,
across our living, not-yet-ravaged faces,
lighting our shoes, our lovely, Thirties' shoes,
our spats in flame, our stickpins raging, raging,
our boys' caps, our black cloches, our fedoras,
one wonders what it was stored in that pocket,
what he might have kept in it, chose to keep,
what seemed to him worthy enough for saving,
what (perhaps more than anything) he held to,
however tenuous and brief the holding.

In the photo his shoes seem new, unscathed,
looking as though they had not yet been walked in,
the light that issues from them so contained,
so manageable, it appears, his smile
so compliant, his breathing, like his presence,
so unobtrusive, I am almost certain
(definitiveness quite eludes me here:
freedom from doubt, pertaining to my brother,
is arrogance, mistaken, self-deluding)
the way he holds himself may have to do
with having come to learn—how can I say this?—
what it will be to die, and to die young.

The woolen cap and leather gloves I wear
match the cap and the gloves my brother wears.
A white silk scarf is knotted at my throat.
I am dressed for a cold day: collar turned,
scarf tucked about my neck, brown leather leggings
shielding my legs from the high coastal wind.
I am smiling, of course, and, as reported,
of the four I am closest to the sea,
so that, as we walk north, light strikes me first.
I reach only to Mother's waist, am blond.
I squint beneath the sun. My cap is set
at what one wants to call a jaunty angle.
I take short steps that winter; I am four.
The waves assault the coast; I hear the gulls cry.

My breath, turned smoke, is rising on the air.
In the background, not completely in focus,
lies the resort itself (the sea unseen),
a mise-en-scène of small shops, baths, hotels,
lining the boardwalk; a few scattered figures,
fading to haze, to blur, loom in the distance,
early walkers like us, although it seems
we have the boardwalk largely to ourselves.
Something about me seems so wholly present,
so here-and-nowhere-else (the way my face
takes light?, the confidence I seem to walk with?,
how I grip Mother's hand?), it is a struggle
to imagine Father, arm slipped in mine,
taking care to hold me before I drift off,
having to anchor me, needing to root me
here in the Thirties, where one finds oneself,
beneath this clamor February sends up
from one end of the boardwalk to the other,
not fifty paces from where we are strolling
this tumult of grey-blue-green sea, momentous,
unrelenting, asking, over and over,
one question, one, offering just one answer
(neither of which, it seems, has been disclosed,
not that year nor in any season since),
spray on the air beading our lips, our faces.

(Scrutinizing this photograph with me,
decades later, tracking down lost details
until, one by one, each has been recovered,
restored to its incomparable luster,
the past freed from the dust which settles on it,
freed from the past, made whole, retrieved intact—
Those were drop earrings I wore, see them?, pearls;
that vast collar was fox, black-as-night fox,
and your leggings had buttons down the side
which I would fasten with a button-hook,
slowly, quite slowly, Mother turns to me
(the turn as lovely as the need to turn),
tears filling her eyes, spilling to her cheeks,
whispers these words: You two were dazzling, dazzling.)

We must be walking back to the hotel,
having gone as far south as we intended.

There is an Oriental curio shop
in the lobby, beside the elevator,
where, each day, I linger, peer through the glass.
In a window showcase framed with bamboo,
slivers of sun caught among painted fan spokes,
teak elephants, necklaces, cloisonné
butterflies, daggers, jardinières, blue inkpots,
I spy a small, square box of jade and ivory,
its latch whittled of ebony and pearl,
as beautiful as anything, at four,
I have seen, hope to see, remember seeing.
I study butterflies, blue inkpots, daggers,
elephants, but it is this, this small, square box,
I pause at, point to, dream of; I say nothing.
Father and I enter the shop; a bell chimes,
and the proprietor comes from the rear,
partitioned by a screen of sleeping dragons.
The man wears sandals and a silk kimono.
Father says he has the extreme good fortune,
this man, of having on display a box
it would give his son, me, pleasure to hold,
much pleasure, in fact. Is this possible?
The man unlocks the showcase, lifts the box,
places it, gently, gently, in my hand.
There are carvings of nightingales and pine-boughs
spilling across its surface, down its sides,
a latticework of intricate cross-weavings
depicting some lost, mythic underbrush
in China (or in paradise)—black loam
(as black as Mother's fox, perhaps), a stream,
a forest floor so dense, so rich, so tangled,
anything, one suspects, will grow here, flourish,
a grove of chinaberry trees to one side,
to the other a stand of one of each:
lime, weeping cherry, almond, plum, quince, peach,
a great, fat, plume-tailed goldfish, in the foreground,
spouting water from jade-encrusted lips.

It is a puzzle as well as a box
(he is addressing me as much as Father):
first the spring which frees the latch must be found
before you can know what may lie inside.
And, should you find it (he now presses something,

and the lid opens), this is the reward
for your perseverance, your cleverness:
a second box, exactly like the first,
nightingales, pine-boughs, goldfish, fruit trees, stream,
is nestled in the first, fitting precisely.
But your confidence should not be excessive,
the man says, smiling, showing two gold teeth:
there is a latch to be sought out here, too,
but placed not where the first latch has been placed.
It is altogether another search,
another quest, you might say, to embark on.
His fingers glide across the second box,
smaller than the first; its lid now springs back.
Within it lies a box, quite small, a third box,
nightingales, pine-boughs, goldfish clinging to it,
crowding the glossy jade and ivory surface,
not a space left unfilled, undecorated.
Perhaps the third box should remain unopened,
at least for now, he says; when you have left here,
you can take with you dreams of what it holds,
what it may hold, even perhaps imagine
what, as well, it may not hold, for which one must
leave in the mind as much room as one can.
The box may do just that, no more than that:
keep us, for perhaps just a little longer,
open to astonishment, to surprise,
accessible to what one understands
dimly, imperfectly, or not at all,
just awhile longer, no more, just awhile.

We must be walking back to the hotel.
We will ride the elevator to rooms
streaked all day with the sun, fronting the sea.
(Even here, rising, I will hear the waves break.)
Father's gift to me will lie on my bed
nestled in Chinese-red rice paper spattered
with dragonflies and willows in goldleaf.
I will hold it, run my thumb on the inlay,
turn it, glimpse views of paradise (or China),
ivory nightingales perched on jade pine-boughs,
a fish standing in midstream spouting silver,
pure silver, from two semi-precious lips,
content, for now, to let the latches wait,

postpone the search, delay that quest of quests
 to which the man in sandals had alluded,
 at least until some principle is mastered
 (vague, though no less substantial for its vagueness)
 of where the puzzle ends and box begins,
 where the border between them, evenings, lies
 why paradise cannot be China, too,
 discrepancies of which I have no inkling.
 Father will order cocktails from room service
 as the sky darkens; after naps and baths,
 we will descend once more to the first level
 (Palm Terrace, the old operator sings out,
 as he slides the door back and we debark).
 From our window table we see the first stars,
 winter stars, brilliant, distant, ringed with ice.
 (I know the phases of the moon, the planets,
 names for the constellations, thanks to Father.)
 Mother wears a green frock tiered with black fringe
 and a choker of beads about her throat
 whose stones I ask the name for: opal, opal.
 (Each night I ask, loving the music words make;
 in the mind the sound seems one with the stone.)
 Dinner is served; night falls; the moon appears,
 a half-moon, like those circling Mother's cloche.
 To one side of the potted palms, a trio
 plays, has in fact been playing since we entered.
 (I seem not unaware of what it plays,
 of what, even then, lights dimmed, candles lit,
 couples, one by one, finding their way slowly
 to the dance floor, stars rising, music "means.")
 My brother kicks me underneath the table;
 I may begin to cry; I kick him back.
 (Beneath the linen cloth, I glimpse his shoes;
 so polished, so well-cared for, so robust,
 so durable, their soles so permanent,
 so—what word suits them best?—impenetrable,
 shoes that seem not quite his, or not yet worn,
 but lent him, lent him briefly, perhaps rented.
 I know my brother's shoes by heart, by heart.)
 A cake is brought for Father from the kitchen;
 the musicians, on cue, play Happy Birthday.
 Mother and Father rise to dance; we giggle.
 Through the main course I hear the surf, now muffled,

repeat, over and over the same question,
offer, over and over, the same answer,
neither of which a child of four deciphers
though, in time, with such mastery as promised,
such gifts of understanding, of control,
such fluency, such vision, such command,
I may be able to have pieced together
some underlying principle pertaining
to questions and to answers, objects, words,
to one thing and another, separating
my brother from his shoes, dreaming from dying,
box from pure puzzle, puzzle from pure box,
nightingale from pine-bough, goldfish from stream,
the border between paradise and China
(or provinces of each which lie between),
that faint line (tide?, waves?, salt?, horizon?, boardwalk?),
indistinct in the dark from window tables
facing the night sea, rumored to divide them.

Pops in Portland, *Elektra* in San Francisco by Samuel Lipman

Artwise, as one might say, Portland, Oregon, is a special place. It is the home of a statewide symphony orchestra, its own opera company, a visual arts museum, a historical museum, various kinds of theater, and all the mutually supportive enterprises which go to make up what is locally called an Artquake. Even—or especially—the incoming Portland mayor has joined the parade: Bud Clark is none other than the sensitive soul who posed, backside to the camera and raincoat flung open before an art object, for that memorable poster captioned “Expose yourself to art.” How’s that for class?

At the present moment all the Portland artshearts are throbbing to the beat of a new space for symphony concerts. Dubbed the Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall in honor of its major donor, this edifice is the old Paramount Theater, a movie house dating from the late 1920s, that halcyon era when plaster replicas of the interior of the Alhambra were just the thing for giving tone to the latest exploits of Rudolph Valentino and Douglas Fairbanks. Naturally the excitement over Schnitzer Hall is integrated into the whole Portland renaissance; even the signs on the temporary fences closing off construction areas outside the hall bear an injunction perhaps not unrelated to the mayor-elect’s offering to art: “Flaunt Your Civic Pride,” these signs urge those timid souls lacking in urban commitment.

So many caring instincts so bounteously displayed seemed to require (of at least this

listener) a witness to what is going on in the erstwhile City of Roses. So on a Sunday evening late in October I found myself seated in the Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall listening to the only musical offering taking place there during my three-day stay in Portland. The event was a “Merrill Lynch Pops” concert, one of the series of six events (each of them repeated twice) under the joint sponsorship of the famed brokerage giant and the Oregon Symphony Orchestra. To be fair, I don’t suppose I would have chosen a Glenn Miller evening by which to judge either the hall or musicmaking in Portland, had I the choice: all the participants were heavily amplified, making acoustical judgment of the hall impossible, and a full menu of Glenn Miller and related arrangements seems (again to me) insupportable without convivial talk and a girl in tow. But arts-loving beggars can’t be choosers, and I had just spent a lunch hearing Oregon’s Governor, Victor Atiyeh, telling an audience of art-school deans that everything was art, from the souvenirs bought on the street to great paintings. So I went, and I sat through it all, two musty hours of nostalgia and reconstructed memories.

As is the case in most old movie palaces, the lobbies of Schnitzer Hall seem confined, doubtless because they were never meant to provide an audience with space in which to promenade before a performance and during intermission. Making matters worse, the available space was severely cramped by a

profusion of wine bars, liquor bars, and snack and wine bars. Indeed, so many of those walking about before the concert and during the intermission were carrying full plastic tumblers that one could well understand how the arts function today as oases, if not from ugliness, at least from thirst.

While on the subject of Schnitzer Hall's public spaces, mention should be made of the Oregon Symphony Association curio cart just across the narrow lobby from the first wine bar as one walked in. There were the usual memorabilia on sale here, all doubtless bought from some novelty merchant who specializes in supplying shops in arts institutions. Here was a chance to buy an Oregon Symphony Wine Bag, T-shirts emblazoned "Jimmy" (in honor of the Oregon Symphony's music director, James DePreist), and an Oregon Symphony Appointment Calendar. My own favorite souvenir was a pair of notepads available at a modest price: the first pad had its pages wittily headed (in old-fashioned lettering) "Chekhov-Liszt"; the second pad was inscribed "Chopin-Liszt."

Because I too am tempted to engage in bad punning, I can honestly say that the concert itself was listless. There must be a lot of Miller fans and other aficionados of the big-band era; the concert I attended seemed just about sold out. Everything—upwards of twenty tunes performed by eighteen musicians and two vocalists—was received with decorous appreciation by an audience well in its sixties and older. The concert began and ended with "Moonlight Serenade," ploddingly played, as if the musicians onstage, most of them (except for the two blandly attractive vocalists) the same age as the audience, were going through the motions of old memories rather than playing anything fresh and exciting. The conductor was Norman Leyden, an accomplished band leader and conductor who has much experience in doing pops concerts in the northwest; in this capacity he does the pops for both the Oregon and the Seattle orchestras. Leyden beguiled and cajoled the audience, explaining, with many human

touches, what was going to happen onstage—and then, when it happened, he led the audience in expressing its appreciation. It all was like Lawrence Welk live, an opening up of a time capsule stored in a retirement village.

What was missing, of course, was the spirit of the music. One need not be a blind partisan of swing music to know that at its best it was tough, insistent, vital, and often even bitter in its suggestion of a world more opulent and glamorous than its musicians and listeners could ever themselves occupy. Tune after tune—the likes of "Tuxedo Junction," "Stairway to the Stars," and "A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square"—went by pointlessly, with the brass slides, the blue notes, and the rhythmic jabs losing all their corners in the general mood of tiredness. Fittingly, the lead saxophonist was given a solo to celebrate his retirement; these concerts, we were told, marked the end of his career.

But, disappointing as the musical lacks of the concert were, even more disturbing was a major question arising out of the whole sorry business: what was the Oregon Symphony Orchestra doing putting its name on the concert? One doubts that many of the orchestra's own musicians were involved in the performance; the repertory was not by the wildest stretch of the imagination a symphony orchestra repertory; altogether the evening had as much to do with the body of music which is a symphony orchestra's concern as Glenn Miller had to do with Arturo Toscanini. To say this is not to make value judgments or even—perish the thought—to be elitist. It is merely to make a necessary distinction in functions between properly separate kinds of musical activity.

Why, then, was this concert given? The answers are, it would seem, three. First, there can be no doubt that this Glenn Miller evening, and events like it (which in the case of the Oregon Symphony Orchestra include concerts titled "The Best of Broadway," "The Genius of George Shearing," "The Music of Richard Rodgers," "Frankie Laine at the Pops," and "Your Hit Parade"), make money; in so doing they not only swell the

orchestra's coffers but convince potential corporation and foundation contributors that the enterprise is deserving of support because it is doing so much to pay its own way. Second, as with all cultural institutions today, much emphasis is put on service by orchestras to *all* the community, as if a hospital, to be doing its job, had to have its rooms occupied by everyone, not just the sick. And finally these concerts in Portland take place because Merrill Lynch construes its own interest as served by being seen to sponsor "the arts" when in fact the corporate endorsement is going to commercially viable popular culture.

What is so troubling about the Oregon Symphony Orchestra's willingness to appear before the public as an impresario of widely attractive entertainment is the message the organization is thus sending to its true present audience and to the future audience it must educate in the interest of its own survival. The message is that all musics are equally worthy of presentation, not just by someone somewhere, but by a symphony orchestra charged with the duty of promoting high culture through the performance of a "classical" music. It would be foolish, of course, to think that this duty is always to be discharged solely through the performance of the most difficult music; over many years in Boston, Arthur Fiedler proved that unsophisticated audiences could be musically interested in the classics by their lively presentation, with lighter stuff used at the end of the concert as a reward for staying the course.¹ In the case of the Portland concert I

heard, no educational function was served, and the result can only have been confusion in the minds of well-meaning people about just what it is that a symphony orchestra does, or is supposed to do.

A word, too, must be said about Schnitzer Hall as a place to experience a cultural event. Sadly, totally lacking from Schnitzer Hall is anything of the true majesty and glitter of the era of great classical music and of the buildings which were coeval with this music; equally lacking is anything of the clean lines and structural audacity of the great architecture of our own century. Despite all the money that, through a patron's generosity, has been spent on remodeling this old Portland movie theater, the building remains today what it was at its birth: a dingy pleasure palace built to dupe a mass public with a cheaply built tinsel imitation of an "exotic" and dimly perceived original.

To go from Portland's ex-movie-theater concert hall to San Francisco's War Memorial Opera House is to go from costume jewelry to the real thing. Completed in 1932, the Opera House was built on an Italian classical model, and serves as the capstone of the original conception of San Francisco's Civic Center. The building's exterior is in terra-cotta and granite; the interior was well described by music critic Arthur Bloomfield in his *50 Years of the San Francisco Opera* (1972):

What was the new home like? Wider in its auditorium space than the typical large European opera house, but far from barn-like or inelegant. While some observers thought Chicago's recently completed Civic Opera House suggested a movie "palazzo," San Francisco's "dream" had more of an aristocratic feel, without being overembellished. Few houses anywhere could boast a foyer as spacious, attractive and friendly as the great main floor oblong.

For the Opera House's first half century, and until the recent completion of Davies Symphony Hall, it served as the home of

1 Indeed, the Oregon Symphony Orchestra does have such presentations, in this case called "Symphony Sundays"; significantly, though they are also performed in Schnitzer Hall, they are nowhere listed—though the pops concerts are—in "Portland Performs," the glossy brochure of downtown arts activity put out by the Association for Portland Progress and *Oregon* magazine. In any case the educational mission of these concerts is undercut by the rhetoric used to gull ticket buyers: "You'll love the greats of classical music! Favorite classical selections from *Grand Canyon Suite* to *Pines of Rome*."

both the San Francisco Opera and the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra. The acoustics for an orchestra—or a soloist—on the stage were remarkable, being full, rich, properly brilliant, and always immediate. Used for staged opera, the house is perhaps even more distinguished, providing voices with amplitude and cover, and projecting the pit orchestra with a body and force that is at the same time never overpowering.

Whatever the production flaws of the San Francisco Opera's current presentation of the *Elektra* of Richard Strauss, the real star of the evening was the musical performance. With a vocally towering traversal of the title role by American soprano Janis Martin, a lyrical working-out of the often dissonantal score by English conductor Jeffrey Tate, and the suave and accurate playing from the San Francisco Opera Orchestra, one was able to hear Strauss's music in all its late romantic glory. This was, in short, one *Elektra* which didn't make its point by brutality, roughness, and terror.² Instead, one was conscious at all times of an unending stream of melody and harmonic lushness, a total effect making clear in a way I have rarely heard the compositional connection that *Elektra* (1906-08) provides between the earlier, decadent ripeness of *Salome* (1904-05) and the delicious melodic charm and the pleasing harmonies of *Der Rosenkavalier* (1910).

It would, I suppose, be kinder to pass over quickly what one saw on the stage, as opposed to what one heard. The costumes of many of the women—including Elektra

herself—were disfigured by the planting on their fully clothed chests of what can only be called pasties. The acting—Janis Martin's, alas, included—seemed redolent, in its extravagant and arty hand and arm gestures, of Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis. All of the singers' sweeping clumsinesses were made unfortunately visible by a relatively brightly lit stage. From this performance alone, one could gain a pretty good realization of just how much aesthetic good Wieland Wagner accomplished after World War II at Bayreuth by the simple expedient of turning the stage lights almost out.

But in a perverse way, *Elektra* made an overwhelming impact on this occasion despite the huge gap between the poor stuff to be seen and the riches to be heard. Here in fact was a demonstration of the true nature of the entire operatic enterprise. Opera can survive when poorly performed theatrically but well performed musically; when the balance goes the other way, however, all the great acting in the world cannot conceal just how tawdry opera can be. The music triumphed in the San Francisco *Elektra*, and the result was never less than moving.

A final comment, I suppose, is in order about the touching spectacle one always sees at the offerings of the fall season of the San Francisco Opera: the leaders, male and female, of Bay Area society, all dressed up in their dowdy (and often hardly new) fancy clothes, just loving their opera, the opera they have so largely paid for over the years. Here, if such were needed, is convincing proof that, despite all the changes in American mores which have chosen the City by the Golden Gate in which to flower, the San Francisco *haut monde* still remains a passing good approximation of the upper crust of Edith Wharton's old New York. Not so innocent, perhaps, but certainly every bit as tough.

2 No better version of the traditional way of doing *Elektra* can be heard than Astrid Varnay's singing and Dimitri Mitropoulos's conducting in the New York Philharmonic radio broadcast of December 25, 1949, from Carnegie Hall. Searing and frightening, this performance is—or was—available on a "pirate" label as Robin Hood Records 5101-2.



Detail from "Evening on Karl Johan's Street," 1893. Bergen, Rasmus Meyers Samlinger.

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What's so great about the RSC?

by Mimi Kramer

In the context of the Royal Shakespeare Company's visit to New York this year and Terry Hands's productions of *Cyrano de Bergerac* and *Much Ado About Nothing* at the Gershwin Theater on Broadway, I have been thinking back to a conversation I had with a friend not long ago during a recent trip to London. We were sitting at a little table outside of a wine bar in Covent Garden. It was one of those clear, chilly end-of-summer evenings in London that seem to take a long time to settle down around you, and the whole world, as it went loping by us on King Street, seemed wanting to intrude: the young man who wanted to bum a cigarette, the older one who wanted to sit down at our table, the skinheads leaning noisily against a nearby car.

But we had bought a bottle of wine and were deep in conversation. We were talking about London theater and somehow the conversation seemed to keep coming back to the Royal Shakespeare Company. Alison actually works for the RSC, in their administrative offices at the Barbican Arts Centre. I had been spending a good deal of time around the Barbican myself, seeing various RSC productions. We were both excited about one or two things we had recently seen at Stratford—and a little exhilarated, the way one is on those clear, chilly, end-of-summer evenings in London. Not to mention the wine, of course. Anyway, I don't remember precisely what led up to Alison's rather abrupt question, but the talk must

have gotten a little enthusiastic before she brought it back down to earth. She suddenly looked at me suspiciously and said, "Come to think of it, what *do* you think is so great about the RSC? I mean, they *are* very, very good. But surely there is something comparable in New York; there must be! Isn't there?"

I remember feeling winded and a little bit panicky. It seemed like such a big question—and so naïve. Where did one begin? How could I explain to Alison that there was virtually no repertory theater in New York at all, when London could boast not one but two huge subsidized theaters, the National and the RSC, each turning out a steady stream of plays: old, new, and forgotten! We had both just seen *Richard III* and *Henry V* at Stratford, where *Hamlet* and *The Merchant of Venice* (among other things) were also running in repertory and a production of *Love's Labour's Lost* was about to open. In London, the RSC was doing (again, among other things) *Volpone* and another Jacobean comedy, while their productions of *Twelfth Night*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Henry VIII* still did not quite account for all the Shakespeare being produced in London at the time. How could I describe how infrequent and inadequate productions of Shakespeare generally were in New York? And where, oh where, was someone who could corroborate my story, some native New Yorker milling about the crowds in Covent Garden Market?

Keeping an eye out for passing Instamatics and an ear cocked for accents west of Land's End, I began to tell Alison horror stories of the state of the classics and repertory theater in New York. I told her a little about how Shakespeare is produced there. I said that there was, indeed, an institution called the New York Shakespeare Festival/Public Theater which, every year, gives mediocre productions of one or two Shakespeare plays, most of them *Hamlet*. I said that a number of smaller companies occasionally attempt Shakespeare, particularly in the summer at various outdoor venues, but that most of it was fairly gimmicky and all of it far below the level of competence demanded of Michael Croft's teenagers at the National Youth Theater. I told her about a relentlessly well-meaning little production of *Measure for Measure* I had seen this summer in which most of the performances had ranged from bad television-acting to middling burlesque and the only member of the cast with any inkling of how to speak verse had been relegated to the comparatively small role of Mariana, while the performance of the actress playing Isabella would have caused concern on "Captain Kangaroo."

I said that *American* "classics" were frequently revived on Broadway, but that as often as not these productions were miscast with big-name movie stars. There was, I said, a theater called the Circle In The Square which often did productions of European "classics," but that even a first-rate production like *Heartbreak House* (which had been New York theater at its very best) was bound to have, in addition to Dana Ivey (far and away the best actress in town), one or two important roles filled apparently by someone the stage manager had hauled off the street at preview time ("Hey, mac! Ya wanna be in a play?") The Circle In The Square, I pointed out, only produces one or two plays each year anyway, and they could range anywhere from something as good as the recent revival of *The Caine Mutiny Court-Martial* to something as ghastly as the more recent productions of *Design for Living* and *Awake and Sing!* Downtown at the Public

Theater, meanwhile, Joe Papp seemed firmly committed—for the next few years, at any rate—to importing contemporary work from Central Europe and Great Britain. So that the Roundabout Theater, where the direction was simple and unpretentious but not particularly inspired, was the only regular source for productions of "modern classics" in the city. Finally I said that there was, in fact, a large and prosperous center for the performing arts in Manhattan which did, indeed, boast two elegant theaters, but that for six of the last seven years those theaters had been dark.

This was, I see now, a terrible answer. It approached the question from the wrong end entirely. You cannot explain a phenomenon like the RSC by looking at what doesn't exist in New York; you can only try to isolate what RSC theater is and why it works. The Royal Shakespeare Company did not burst, fully armed, from the head of the Arts Council of Great Britain and RSC theater did not come into existence because the English are better or nicer or more sophisticated and talented people than we are. It came about because of Peter Hall and John Barton and the radical departures they made from what was the predominant approach to Shakespeare production when Peter Hall took over directorship of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in 1959.

Quite simply, Peter Hall did three things when he took over the theater at Stratford: along with John Barton, he revolutionized the way Shakespearean verse was spoken on stage; he established a permanent resident company at Stratford; and he fostered an approach to Shakespeare in which the shape of the production as a whole was more important than the individual performance of any single actor. Before about 1960, from the Twenties onward, Shakespeare production had focused almost entirely on the performance of a great actor. The Old Vic was the fountainhead from which most Shakespeare flowed, but what people went flocking to see there and in the West End was a *performance*—"the Gielgud Hamlet" or "the

Olivier Richard III”—and the criticism of the period reflects this. Kenneth Tynan’s reviews of productions of Shakespeare, until the mid-Fifties, are almost exclusively devoted to describing great (or poor) performances. He mentions other elements of production only to say that there is nothing to say.

This state of affairs had proceeded from circumstances within the Old Vic itself as well as from developments in the wider context of London theater between the wars. But the tenacity of this style of production—the fact that it prevailed from the late Twenties well into the late Fifties—must partly be attributed to the emergence of a generation of actors who were, in fact, capable of making history in a theater in a single night. This was the Great Actor Generation—and they *were* great actors, and still are, those that are still alive. Gielgud, Guinness, Richardson: the guys whose voices you would know anywhere. And, of course, Olivier. But Olivier represented a new approach to acting Shakespeare, indeed, he was inventing it: a newfangled “naturalistic” style which many accused of lacking “poetry,” but which he got away with because he was so extraordinarily good at it.

Gielgud, on the other hand, knew how to speak verse and it was primarily to hear great poetry read greatly that people went to see Shakespeare. (Even Tynan, in 1947, is only half tongue-in-cheek when he writes that “there seems to be little else, in an averagely good performance, to enrapture the mind.”) Nothing in the spoken arts is quite as beautiful as the sound of Alec Guinness or John Gielgud reading Shakespearean verse. If you listen to a recording of someone like John Barrymore reading snippets from *Hamlet* in the late Twenties and then to Guinness and Gielgud in the Old Vic recordings of *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* made in the Fifties, the difference is staggering. By comparison, Barrymore sounds as though he were giving an elocution lesson. His delivery bears no relation to the lugubrious music of Gielgud’s voice or to the long, slow, pounding, and funereal tones of Guinness’s soliloquies.

Gielgud’s Hamlet, wishing that this too, too solid flesh would melt, sounds like nothing on earth. Unless it is Gielgud’s Richard II invoking everyone to sit upon the ground and tell sad stories of the death of kings . . . but that’s the snag. And that’s where Peter Hall and John Barton come in.

What Hall and Barton aimed at was a marriage between the old style of speaking verse “poetically,” exemplified by Gielgud, and the new style that Olivier and other film actors were exploring: a balance between the “naturalistic” and the “lyrical.” Of course, “naturalism” in acting is a very relative term: each generation sees itself as forging a style of acting “more realistic” than the one that went before. But the balance sought by Barton and Hall was founded on more objective criteria, lodged in ideas about textual analysis and verse structure that Barton and Hall had been developing since their not-so-far-off undergraduate days studying under George Rylands and F.R. Leavis at Cambridge. The technique they evolved originated with an extraordinarily analytical approach to both the structure of Shakespeare’s verse and the text of a play. It examined the logic of grammar and sentence structure and paid minute attention to the way the rhythm of an individual line can play against the pattern of pentameter verse. It tried to differentiate between a character who is speaking in a self-consciously “heightened” manner for rhetorical or self-indulgent reasons (like Richard II in the speech cited above) and one whose thoughts just happen to find the cadence of poetry (like Hamlet of the soliloquies). It worried about why Shakespeare uses prose when he does and about why a character will sometimes depart from his normal habit of speech. Above all, it sought for the actor—in the answers to such questions—some guideline to finding a middle ground between the sound of a character’s words and their meaning.

Now the debate between Nature and Poetry in drama is as old as theater: Aristophanes thought the realism of Euripides’s plays demanded from his actors a level of “naturalism” that was frankly turning the-

ater into a bathhouse. Again, the terms are relative. Moreover, verse-speaking is ever in a state of flux: fashions in acting come and go even at the RSC. What we hear when Derek Jacobi plays Cyrano de Bergerac in 1984 is very different from the detached rationality that Terry Hands might have elicited from an Alan Howard ten years ago or the evenly cerebral performance that Peter Hall might have got from an Ian Richardson ten years before that. But when Derek Jacobi stands outside Roxanne's window rhapsodizing about love and his voice compels you from the beginning of each thought to its end so that your attention never wanders for a moment, part of what you are experiencing is the result of work done by John Barton and Peter Hall in the early Sixties and their efforts to find a compromise between the logic and conviction of everyday speech and the exigencies of verse.

Of course verse-speaking was only one area of Hall's new approach. More visible was the production style that he developed, along with Peter Brook and Michel Saint-Denis (briefly his co-directors), and began making a trademark of the company. Briefly, it involved three things, all of which are still recognizable aspects of the RSC style: 1) a pseudo-Brechtian style of staging and stagecraft; 2) an attempt to unite all aspects of a production—the sets, the lighting, the costumes, and the music as well as staging and performance—in the service of an idea; and 3) a reading of a play that tended to be more objective and literary critical than it was subjective and empathic. Where traditional methods of production tried to tell a story, simply and effectively, from the protagonists' point of view, offering the audience a chance to empathize with the hero, Hall's approach was able to stand back from the protagonists and judge them against the prevailing values in the play. It was the difference between presenting a character solely as he sees himself, looking only at the actual words he speaks (where King Lear, for example, *is* "a man more sinned against than sinning" because he says so) and looking also at other elements in the picture—his

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actions, for example, his powers of judgment, his friends and what they said about him—all with a view to teaching an audience more about a character than how to feel for him. Hall's readings of a play demanded from an actor a kind of performance in which, subtly, he was simultaneously playing a character from his own point of view and *not* from his own point of view, and then united that performance with all the other production elements around it. RSC productions looked for ways of turning staging and stagecraft into a running commentary—to make a statement, pursue an image, or present a unified vision of a play. Thus, where traditional methods had pretty much used lighting and scenery to establish atmosphere and a sense of place (respectively), costumes to evoke a time, and music to create a mood and cover scene changes, the functions of various elements of production at the RSC was not so cut and dried. And scene changes, at the RSC, were not something you wanted covered: for where the prevailing methods of Shakespeare production had sought to lessen the embarrassing inconveniences inherent in the form of theater, the RSC made use of them. Instead of using theatrical convention to apologize for the ways in which a play did not resemble films or real life, the RSC style explored new ways of using theatrical convention to create the world of the play.

It is worth noting that almost none of the “innovations” that constituted Hall's approach were in themselves new ideas. Granville-Barker, in the early part of the century, had striven to find some middle ground for the Shakespearean actor between the realistic and the stylized; Hall's predecessors at Stratford had long been aware of the need for a resident company; and Peter Brook, a lone voice in the wilderness of London theater, had been staging Brechtian productions of Shakespeare for years. Hall knew a good idea when he saw one and it could be argued that his influence on the staging of Shakespeare comes down to little more than having seen and implemented at Stratford three very good ideas. I would argue,

though, that he did something more, that he managed to invent an approach to staging Shakespeare that amounts to turning practical criticism into theater.

And that, in the end, is the strength of the RSC I think: that one foot (or part of a foot) that Hall and Barton left behind, solidly planted in academia. What is so good about the RSC and about a production like Terry Hands's *Much Ado About Nothing* isn't English accents or English tailoring or “Masterpiece Theater” or the ghost of Laurence Olivier crying out in the rafters: it's the nonrealistic set and the nonrealistic lighting and the music and the staging and the way that all are used thematically to bring about a view of the play that concerns more than just what happens in it. It is the solo cellist with whom Terry Hands begins to people the stage in the first few seconds of the play so that Messina is immediately defined as a world in which it is perfectly normal for a pretty young girl wearing ringlets and wide taffeta skirts to sit down under a tree and pick out a mournful tune on a cello. It is the tree that isn't a tree but only the drawing of a tree, apparently etched in glass. It is the sense of place established by simply flying in another tree or moving some chairs or finding the slant of light that seems to alter our perspective of a view of hills. It is the self-contained world set off by the glassy, box-like frame that surrounds the stage, a world of fragile, chiming surfaces, like the lilting music whose fragile, chiming surface runs counter to an ominous and melancholy undertone. It is the long, distorted shadows cast on the masking and the proscenium arch which, like the rippling reflections of the people and places we see cast in the shining surface of the floor and walls, seem to echo the distortions in the play: a man and woman's distorted images of themselves cast by their friends; the brittle reflection of a young girl's reputation shattered by malice. It is the young men we sometimes see, at the beginning of a scene, fencing with one another in jest: a parody of some battle-in-earnest which, at the beginning of the play, has taken place somewhere. It is the beacon

that sometimes gleams in the night sky from a nearby promontory, a reminder of seriousness and danger and an outside world that never impinges on Messina.

Mind you, not everything in Terry Hands's production of *Much Ado About Nothing* is as great as all that. I felt uncomfortable during the first half of the performance: Derek Jacobi seemed to be giving an unusually effeminate tinge to the role of Benedick; and Sinead Cusack's Beatrice seemed in danger of laying a few of the characters out cold on that shiny glass floor. It seems to me that what ails Benedick and Beatrice in the first half of the play is obvious enough without having to play the one as a raging queen or the other as a harpy. But then, the RSC is generally better at dealing with the enigmatic than the obvious.

Anomaly, I think, is the secret here. The best RSC productions seem to head straight for the anomalies in Shakespeare: that word or line or speech or scene or character that catches the eye because it breaks some pattern. It is a wise means of access to a play, first because it assumes that the playwright did everything he did for a reason, and second because new anomalies present themselves with every reading of a text: the short line that seems to break the rhythm of pentameter, the scene that serves no function in the plot, the nameless battle that will never come up again but for some reason begins the play, the messenger who serves no purpose in the scene but has a pompous and shallow way of talking. One time round with *Much Ado* you notice, perhaps, that Claudio is really a rather loathsome fellow, so you emphasize the contrast between his relationship with Hero and Benedick's with Beatrice. Another time you notice that Don Pedro has strange ideas about how to relate to other people: so you let him usurp from his brother, Don John, the role of Malcontent. At the end of this production Don Pedro, a lone black figure on a stage swirling with white and gold, walks offstage into the shadows in the direction of an exit no one else has ever used. It is typical of RSC staging to pick up on some crux that schol-

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ars have been worrying for generations and turn it into theater: the sprawling structure of *Antony and Cleopatra*; the abundance of music in *Twelfth Night*; that fact that there never *was* a seacoast in Bohemia; or that at the end of *Much Ado About Nothing* Don Pedro is depressed.

It is this almost unfailing instinct for finding a play's alleged weaknesses and turning them into strengths that informs as well Terry Hands's production of *Cyrano de Bergerac* and makes it such good theater. Of course, with its great theatrical set pieces and grand dramatic gestures, *Cyrano* is pretty good theater to begin with. Its fundamental weakness as a play, however, is that it uses the idiom of realism to present events that are essentially unrealistic. It asks us to accept the wildly unlikely and to take it literally. Now all literature before a certain period actually deals with unrealistic events (verisimilitude doesn't really come on the scene until the eighteenth-century novel), but most literature dealing with the magical or heroic also possesses some mechanism inherent in the conventions of its form which either smooths over the lack of verisimilitude or else absolves the audience from the necessity of taking things too literally. *Cyrano* doesn't—and for a very good reason. Rostand's whole point, of course, in *Cyrano* was to thumb his nose at the realism of the Dumas and Ibsens, the Strindbergs and Shaws. He wanted to put on stage the triumph of heroic idealism and romanticism. The whole point of *Cyrano* and his “panache” is that they *are* larger than life. Which is as good a reason as any for writing a play in which there is not one ghost of an idea, in which the psychological depth of none of the characters approaches two fingers of Scotch, and in which we are to accept that a girl intellectual enough to care about the quality of pillow-talk she gets, devoted enough to follow her lover to the front lines, and resourceful enough to get there, requires fourteen years and a very big hint to work out whom she really loves.

Still, *Cyrano* is such a wonderful mixture

of the comic, the romantic, the heroic, and the burlesque, that its lack of verisimilitude is not really a problem until the last scene: *Cyrano's* death. This is the first instance in the course of the play in which *Cyrano* has not been acting a part or putting on a show for someone's benefit. Throughout the play his larger-than-life persona has gone hand in hand with some form of spectacle. Now, in his death, we see him for the first time as he is—in *extremis*, the man himself. And he isn't any different! That *Cyrano* dies as spectacularly and theatrically as he lived is again the whole point, of course; but for this reason, perhaps, his death always fails to move me. *Cyrano* never seems to have any resonance as a real person: he is just something sad that happened in a play.

Ralph Koltai's sets for *Cyrano* at the Gershwin Theater are even more beautiful than those for *Much Ado*—and more effective in dealing with the play's weaknesses. The first thing an audience sees on entering the theater is the Act I set for the Hotel de Bourgogne. It is an elaborate affair, but strangely balanced and uncluttered, full of dark, massive furniture draped in dark brocade. Cobwebs and tattered gauze seem to drip from everywhere in the room, particularly from three outsized chandeliers that hang from threadbare ropes of red velvet about ten feet straight down to the floor. Because there is no curtain, the audience has a long time to examine the set and its blend of realistic, gothic, and surreal acts as a visual preface, suggesting that the play we are about to see may be full of cobwebs, things that seem threadbare or had been put away, things that are wildly out of proportion. It suggests that an old story is about to be told and that in it we may encounter things, like the chandeliers, that are not to be taken literally.

All of the sets for *Cyrano* are ingeniously devised and superbly executed. But I think the most effective design decision Terry Hands made in this production has to do with the size of *Cyrano's* nose, traditionally hideously and grotesquely large. Derek Jacobi's wasn't really all that huge: I mean, he

had a big nose, don't get me wrong. But it wasn't *unrealistic*; it did not make his a cartoon of a face. Consequently, Cyrano wasn't really ugly—he was rather distinguished looking, in fact, which put things in a new light. Jacobi's Cyrano became a man whose happiness was obstructed not so much by fate as by himself, not so much by ugliness as by an apprehension of ugliness. It amounted to a rather subtle distinction (partly because Jacobi did not play Cyrano as a pitiable or vulnerable figure), but once made, everything else began to fall into place.

Question: have you ever known a truly ugly man or woman who was aware of being ugly? No, of course you haven't; neither have I. But one can think of scores of people who regard themselves as ugly without being so. It was suddenly understandable that Cyrano should be so pathologically sensitive about his nose; and his commitment to honesty—in this light—became almost another disguise behind which he was hiding from the discovery of some ghastly truth within himself. It was suddenly believable that he should go to such lengths to deceive Roxanne as much from a desire to avoid a confrontation with failure as from more generous motives. And in the play's last moments, the symbolic host of abstractions with which Cyrano duels to the death (and which have never made any sense to me because he does not possess any of those vices—Deceit, Compromise, Prejudice, Cowardice, Stupidity) became not actual faults but the shadows of vices he had always been afraid of finding in himself.

To praise two RSC productions in New York is not to say that London theater is better than New York theater. The Royal Shakespeare Company is by no means representative of theater in London. Theater in London is not uniformly better than it is here: there is more of it and of a wider variety, and there is better value for the money. But the West End produces just as much bad theater as Broadway does and most of what one sees in "fringe" theater is more

interesting than it is good. Nor is it true that the British are better actors as a rule. There are some things we do much, much better. My friend Alison, for instance, has probably never seen a really great Broadway musical—not if she was impressed by that production of *Guys and Dolls* they did at the National Theater several years ago. And the National Theater production of David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross* is a complete disaster. It misses the central conflict and values of the play in very much the way that American productions of Shakespeare go astray. The actors do not even seem to understand the idiom of the language.

I could go on for pages about how much better the Broadway production of *Glengarry Glen Ross* was and why. But the style of the Royal Shakespeare Company produces a great theatrical experience in the same way that the Mamet play did. Nothing looks quite like RSC theater, nothing sounds quite like it, and nothing feels quite like it in the audience. And when, at the end of the evening, members of a New York audience with dinner reservations or a train to catch who have begun making their way purposefully up the aisles turn and stop where they are, gazing back at the stage as curtain after curtain calls the company back out until that embarrassing moment comes when the cast starts to wave good night, what makes the audience still stand there and begin waving back is something more than Anglophilia.

Of course, I didn't say any of this that night in Covent Garden: it didn't occur to me. I hadn't seen the two productions at the Gershwin Theater yet (or the audience response to them) and, to be honest, I hadn't thought much about what made RSC theater good. So I talked instead about New York theater, trying to explain how this or that had come to pass. Then the wine started flowing more freely and the conversation got a little wild as Alison and I got our great idea. We were going to form an Anglo-American theater troupe, some sort of offshoot of the RSC based in New York. We would need a second stage, of course, as a showcase for contemporary work and for a

place to move the really big successes we had on the main stage with Jacobean drama, Restoration Comedy, Chekhov, Shaw, Greek tragedy, and brilliantly witty adaptations of Aristophanes. The whole point was to start a school, of course—we would ask John Barton to devise a special course for Method actors: “Learn to speak verse like you mean it without murdering the poetry!” We’d go to Trevor Nunn: “Trev,” we’d say, “How would you feel about sending some of your boys back to New York with us? We feel there’s work to be done there!”

A number of obstacles occurred to us, but we were thinking positively, creatively. Money? We’d go to everyone—Exxon, Ford,

Mobil, OPEC—surely someone would be eager to fund so worthy a project! Or we’d go to the government agencies: NEA, NEH, the Board of Education, the arts councils. We’d go to President Reagan: he used to be an actor! Equity laws? We’d get a royal charter, a special dispensation from the Pope. Hell, we’d *build* a theater in the British Embassy and Equity could go munch its beard!

The wine had run out and as sobriety began to take its toll I managed to come up with the one really insuperable obstacle in all of this. I said there wasn’t a market for that sort of theater in New York. I think that was the most outrageous thing I’d said all evening.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion*:

Dufy reconsidered *by Jed Perl*

Melville and his critics *by Peter Shaw*

The Cavallino exhibition in Cleveland

by Creighton Gilbert

Letter from Munich *by John Massengale*

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Brice Marden's abstraction

by Eric Gibson

With all the recognition being accorded Neo-Expressionism and the revival of figure painting in general these days, the time when abstract painting dominated the art scene is becoming more and more a distant memory. Yet abstract painting persists, of course, and one example of it—Brice Marden's non-gestural, geometric, reductive abstraction—was recently on view at the Pace Gallery.

Marden emerged in the middle 1960s as part of the Minimalist movement. Minimalism had only just emerged as a movement in opposition to what were then considered to be the excesses of Abstract Expressionism—in particular its seemingly emotionally profligate, gestural application of paint, its deep, almost solipsistic subjectivity, and its insistence, in some cases, on a metaphysical dimension to painting.

Minimalism set out to move away from that. Beginning with Frank Stella's black and white "pinstripe" paintings, exhibited in 1959 in the Museum of Modern Art's "Sixteen Americans" show, painting was brought down to the realm of the actual and the specific. Formal clarity, structural rigor, and an emphasis on the impersonal became the order of the day. One other thing was important: the literalness, or "objecthood," of the work of art, its status as an object in the world as real as a person or a piece of furniture. Here shape came to acquire a new importance. By breaking out of painting's traditional rectangular format and into spe-

cially tailored, eccentric outlines, artists were able to explore more varied formal problems and to assert the painting's status as something other than merely "a picture."

Almost from its first appearance, Marden's work was taken to be a significant contribution to this movement. One reason may be that, for all his seeming adherence to the Minimalist ethos, he did not seem to embrace it wholeheartedly. He did not seem to go along with the extreme aestheticism the movement called for. His paintings—usually single areas or multiple bands of color on contiguous canvases—offered a more palatable, less threatening, brand of Minimalism. It was always possible, one felt when viewing Marden's work, to be *au courant* and comfortable at the same time.

For example, despite their flatness, the surfaces of Marden's paintings were not as hard as those of his contemporaries because Marden mixed wax into his pigment. This technique he seems to have picked up from Jasper Johns, and for similar ends. Johns at this time was painting in encaustic in order to achieve a sensuous, worked-over surface that would be as expressive as his choice of subjects. Marden's own cultivation of a similar kind of surface represented an attempt to "humanize" his paintings' otherwise harsh, impersonal qualities. The slightly rounded edges of his canvases were apparently meant to achieve the same effect, muting the hard-edged quality that resulted whenever colors met.

Marden, as it turned out, was no ordinary Minimalist. In his writings and in his paintings he made it clear that he aimed for a strong metaphysical content in his work, an aspiration that connects him with such predecessors as Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko, and with such earlier modernists as Mondrian. It was as if Marden had accepted his contemporaries' penchant for formal reduction and rigor, not in order to expunge emotion, but in order to concentrate and essentialize it. And for Marden color itself was the principal means of achieving this universal, even spiritual, dimension.

Does Marden's work live up to such high aspirations? The Pace exhibition offered us a fresh opportunity to explore that question. In recent years, Marden has given an architectonic structure to many of his paintings, constructing them of vertical panels topped by "lintels." At the Pace show there were several such lintel paintings on view, as well as a number of drawings. But the show was an odd mix. Two large paintings hung on one wall along with a third that was set slightly apart, despite its nearly identical format; two smaller paintings of a different palette were placed at one end of the gallery while a much larger picture, chromatically similar, was placed at the other. This last picture, entitled *Coda*, was especially perplexing since it implied a progression nowhere in evidence. The drawings were interspersed throughout the show.

Standing before these paintings, one was struck not by their capacity to engage on any deep or universal level, but rather by a certain spiritual emptiness. Far from feeling drawn into them, one felt oneself being kept at bay, as though some important element was being withheld. The failure of these paintings to communicate something profound was made more dramatic by their human scale, their less-than-boisterous color, and their quasi-totemic, cruciform pictorial architecture. All this gave them a confrontational quality, a "presence" we were clearly intended to respond to. And yet it only took a moment to realize that these

paintings were really only exercises in color. In *Green (Earth)*, for example, Marden's palette is limited to a few close-valued greens, the darkest being nearly black and the lightest olive. In restricting himself to such somber colors and relating them to nature, Marden seemed to be aspiring to some sort of resonant, romantic evocation of the sublime. Yet *Green (Earth)* amounts to little more than a painting of banded greens.

Marden was a pupil of Joseph Albers's at Yale—and it shows. Albers devoted himself to the analysis of color, in particular the effect that comes from juxtaposing two or more saturated areas on a tightly controlled surface. He found—and this became the basis of his teaching and of his art—that the entire structure of a painting could be modified by the slightest alteration of these juxtapositions. In Albers's approach to art the personal or expressive element had a very low priority. Whatever emotional gratification there was to be had from a painting was secondary to its primary purpose, which was visual cerebral.

Color analysis of this sort is the basis of Marden's art as well. But for all his desire to infuse color with the emotion so atrophied in the work of his mentor, color analysis is finally all we are left with in Marden's painting. Two large paintings in the Pace show, *Number 1* and *Number 2*, are oversized exercises in figure-ground relations. In *Number 1*, the two outer verticals of each three-panel group and the top crossbar on each are matched by color (green, blue, and rust respectively), making a post-and-lintel frame for the middle vertical, which then reads as negative space. In *Number 2* this design is reversed. Crossbar and central vertical are identically colored, which yields a cruciform on a neutral ground. Within these structures Marden is able to weave a few interesting variations. In *Number 1* he suggests the effects of light, in the center panel in particular, where the blue post and lintel frame a brilliant yellow vertical. This vertical seems to push itself forward and free from its blue surrounding, dazzling the viewer with intimations of a sun-baked, desert lumines-

cence. But it never quite gets there. Inevitably we are drawn back to the purely optical relationships between the colors.

The same is true of the remaining paintings, *Coda* in particular. *Coda* keys up the color (the crimson and blue are nearly electric) and places atop four vertical panels what looks to be a small-scale Brice Marden painting instead of lintels. It would seem that, in its complexity and “building,” *Coda* is attempting to achieve a crescendo of some sort, although toward what exactly is unclear. In all these paintings Marden is never able to invest the interplay of color with the spirituality he obviously aspires to. The result is Albers-derived color theory presented in an overscale Minimalist pictorial structure.

Where Marden comes closer to success is in a group of works entitled *Masking Drawings*. These are sheets where gridded-up lines of varied thicknesses, colors, media, and distances fill the entire page. In certain respects they are the opposite of the paintings. In many places the geometric rigor of the lines is broken by rounded stains where pigment has pooled or puddled. As a result we are given something we were denied in the paintings: a sense of the material and of the process of creation, and thus a sense of the intimate communion between artwork and artist.

Looking at the drawings, one feels that one has at last encountered Marden’s vaunted richness and complexity. Line is laid

upon line seemingly in order to plot and entrap space, to convey a sense of the physical area to be mapped out on the surface of the page and to delimit the infinite. It is an extraordinary feat, one in which Marden comes very close to achieving the metaphysical feeling to which he aspires in his paintings. Moreover, he does this by calling upon one aspect of pictorial representation, namely space, to perform functions for which two separate aspects—color and shape—are used in his paintings. The sense of two-dimensional space we get in the drawings refers to the material facts at hand—ink, line, paper, flatness—while the suggestion of the three-dimensional points to something beyond all of this.

And here we get to the center of what prevents Marden’s paintings from elevating us in the manner he desires. More than the workings of color, the problem is his insistence on the literalness, the factuality of his means: the flatness of the picture plane, the separateness of each panel, and the “objectness” of each painting. How are we to be persuaded to, in a sense, leave the world behind when everything about a painting draws us back to it? Marden wants his paintings to be more, much more, than the sum of their parts, but it is only in his drawings that he sometimes achieves the kind of transcendence that continues to elude him in the art of painting. Does he, in this respect, represent the problem of abstract art in the Eighties?

A printmaker and his themes

by Creighton Gilbert

An artist who yearns for immortal fame had better not become an engraver, or any other kind of printmaker. Dürer is the only printmaker in history who reached the very top mainly by that route. (Daumier, some would argue, is another.) A few more have combined printmaking with painting. Would Rembrandt and Goya have the aura they do if their prints carried most of the claim for it? In Rembrandt's case it is unlikely, in Goya's a fair possibility, at least to judge by the reproductions of their works in popular books. Today, printmaking is so marginal to tastemaking that the choice hardly comes up. At the most, an artist like Robert Rauschenberg—to take one of the most favorable examples—will, when well established, look into printmaking with a lively curiosity about the technical effects the medium offers and a kindly feeling about the idea of making originals available to people other than the very rich. The art that results is similar to, but less than, the artist's paintings.

There are some compensations for the printmakers. The easy circulation of the multiple originals helped Dürer and Goya, in their own time, overcome the prejudice that their countries were boondocks. Today exhibition programmers love prints, which lack many of the problems of fragility and cost that are tied to the moving of paintings and sculptures. This popularity barely offsets the absence of prints from the permanent displays of museums. Fortunately, print

exhibitions sometimes occasion attractive books in the form of super-catalogues. Such is the recent book about the engraver and woodcut designer Lucas van Leyden, a great contemporary of Dürer who was rightly bracketed with him as to quality in his own time, even by a far-away observer like Vasari.¹ The exhibition that occasioned *The Prints of Lucas van Leyden and his Contemporaries* was on view at the National Gallery of Art in Washington in 1983; the book's authors, Ellen S. Jacobowitz and Stephanie L. Stepanek, served as the exhibition's curators. As is standard, this meant their travelling from one museum to another beforehand to determine which had the finest impression of each print. The reproductions in the book, while they have their ups and downs, generally give us that fine, dry, all-over gleam, faint but intense, that is to connoisseurs of prints what the best hi-fi recording is to audiophiles—almost the absolute experience.

The isolation of prints from the mainstream art audience has an unhappy parallel in most print scholarship. Concentrating on matters of states and plate-wiping, it treats the larger involvements of the history of art—a narrow enough area anyhow—simplistically if at all. We learn from and respect a

1 *The Prints of Lucas van Leyden and his Contemporaries*, by Ellen S. Jacobowitz and Stephanie L. Stepanek. Princeton University Press and the National Gallery of Art, 335 pages, \$65.

report from *The Prints of Lucas van Leyden* that says “the grayish or silvery appearance of the prints executed between 1512 and 1520 has posed the greatest difficulty for connoisseurs whose expectations tend to impressions with greater contrast than can be expected” or that explains how “the ink does not appear to have settled into the furrows on the top right corner” in an otherwise fine impression, so that “the lines in that area look broken and spotted.” There is much here of that kind. But only a coarse-grained criticism could maintain that Lucas’s artistic success “rests on his ability to visualize a story which received no attention from other printmakers, the use of an unusual left-to-right reading format, and the careful compositional arrangement of each segment.” The left-right action is conveyed by figure gestures and movement; “much of Lucas’ fame” the authors say, “is based on this proclivity.” Elsewhere, complicated scenes evoke the comment that “to tame such a wealth of activity and make a clear and unambiguous image became one of Lucas’ greatest accomplishments.” The curators’ “professionalism” is within a narrow range indeed. The left-right flow in a set of narratives was, even if “unusual” among engravers before Lucas, long standard among painters, at least as early as Giotto in Padua. If the print historian were an art historian, no reminder of that would be needed. To be sure, such tunnel vision is found in many specialties. The test is that Lucas himself did not look so narrowly, and it leads to mistakes to present him this way. What do they know of printmaking who only printmaking know?

The authors rightly remark that for Lucas the exposition of stories has a major place, and he often gives us odd ones (like the legend of Mohammed getting drunk and being framed for murder) and odd new designs for standard stories. One of his favored devices is to reverse front and back, putting the important actors of an event in small scale in the distance, filling the front with big anonymous spectators or others. It jostles our ideas of what the event means.

The most famous case, borrowed by Rembrandt with hardly any change in composition, shows Pilate introducing a quite tiny, far-off Christ to a heavy mass of foreground spectators. Soon after Lucas, Breughel made this general device a standard form, as in the *Fall of Icarus* and the *Wedding Dance*. But the authors do not seem to observe that the device was worked to effect before Lucas by many artists. Notably, about forty years before him in nearby Flanders the wonderful manuscript illuminator whom scholars call the Master of Mary of Burgundy played with it brilliantly. The device can carry many messages: the Master of Mary makes it a witty game of visual focusing, articulating at the same time our distance from the holy. Breughel, as Auden explained in his poem “Musée des Beaux Arts,” affirmed that the apparent big event was subsumed in the mechanical routine of the world. When we watch the crowd watching Christ condemned, we may feel complicity or we may instead be guided to spot the bad guys, if the frame effectively reads as cutting us off from the foreground where they have assembled. I am not convinced that in Lucas’s *Christ Falling Under the Cross*, we “associate with the grief” of the fainting Mary and other foreground witnesses “rather than the suffering of Christ,” as the authors maintain. He is further off in space, but also fills the whole right half of the sheet, which is polarized against the left by a sharp-edged dark-light contrast. As in a syncopated bar of music, where attention is split between the actual beat and the one we expected, so here we are made to zoom in to find the narrative nucleus and then oscillate between it and the foreground motif of reaction.

In the many other cases where Lucas drastically revised the usual design of a subject, and in those where he tried out a peculiar subject, the authors try the standard art-historical explanations, but these are frequently not effective. They suggest, for instance, that the *Triumph of Mordecai*, illustrating an incident in the Book of Esther, was appropriate “to honor the Emperor Charles V on his entry to Leiden in 1515.”

They do not tell us why people should have decided on such exceedingly indirect flattery. Indeed, this type of statement often seems weak in the associations it makes, suggesting that the print historian, like mainstream art historians, likes social relevance and hunts for it, presenting it even when it isn't a good fit.

Since Lucas is often so special in his handling of subjects, the authors' one-theme-at-a-time approach often seems inadequate. An approach that linked his procedures in several prints might have yielded more. Thus in the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* of about 1508, showing Mary seated (as was traditional), the authors rightly find it unusual that Joseph sits beside her and hands her a fruit. The *Fall of Man* of the same year shows Eve handing Adam the fruit, which is normal of course, but it is rightly called "unorthodox" that the two sit side by side. The authors do not observe that each odd motif is the ordinary motif of the other print, although the two prints are numbers three and four in the show.

Why would Lucas have depicted these scenes in such a way? The answer is easy as soon as the process is articulated. Everyone understood that Eve and Mary are opposites: Eve's sin is redeemed by Mary's giving birth to the savior Christ. Such complementarity was systematized in popular religious literature of the time, which the authors indeed mention elsewhere. A theologian of the preceding century, who was declared a saint in 1516, had put it this way: "Just as Eve was emptied of grace when she took the fruit and ate it, so Mary was filled with grace when she received in her womb the fruit of divine grace." The idea that Lucas alludes in each print to the subject of the other, by his schemes of composition, seems to fit in other cases. In print number sixteen, *St. George and the Dragon*, it is a "break with tradition" to show the moment when George talks to the princess, assuring her he will go and dispose of the dragon. He holds her hand, and she is in tears—something very few artists have been bold

enough to try. The composition is made from the parallel cylinders of their bodies. In the *Temptation of St. Anthony*, it is "seldom" that there is just one tempter, a woman, as Lucas shows in print number seventeen. Anthony responds with an exorcising gesture. Thus in each case the male saint solves a problem embodied in the female figure; in one case he saves the good woman from evil, in the other he defeats the evil woman.

Susanna and the Elders shows one of Lucas's most intense uses of contrast: a small, distant protagonist—Susanna with her feet in the water—is shown with two bulky, close-up watchers, one pointing at her. As the curious story reports, the old men watched her bathing and plotted to rape her, until the prophet Daniel defeated them. One may think that, since these ugly men so near us are voyeurs, so are we; all other artists treated later moments of the story, notably the moment when the men made their move. But in the same year Lucas also engraved *David and Abigail*, a rare theme, and again in a way strange for the story. Abigail, the Bible relates, courteously offered the virtuous campaigning warrior David the provisions her husband had refused; later she became one of David's wives. Why does Lucas show a huge foreground David on a hill having his first sight of a tiny, curtsying Abigail in a valley? The re-use of the layout of *Susanna and the Elders*—it is found only in these two works—is underlined when the same pig face and pointing finger are given to the foremost of David's soldiers and to one of Susanna's old men. But the complementary moral also reappears: both the male foreground protagonists are meeting women they will seek to possess, one virtuously and one evilly. Still other such pairs could be cited in Lucas's work. It is not that they were made as sets—the sizes of the prints are different—but simply that the sense of each story included reverberations of the other, and Lucas worked with that in working on his composing. It naturally happened as well when he actually did only one of the two

subjects. Thus *Adam and Eve after the Expulsion* is “unprecedented” in that Adam and Eve walk along with one baby, the oldest son Cain. Evidently the memory is again of sinful Eve’s opposite, Mary, when she travels with husband and baby on the flight into Egypt.

Every one of these prints is about one man and one woman (except for Susanna’s two old men) in a charged moment of tension or a situation of pressure. So is Lucas’s most astonishing image, the *Milkmaid*. The center is completely filled by a large, immobile cow, in profile as if positioned for a portrait. Squeezed to one side is the milkmaid, simpering flirtatiously, aware of the male cowherd on the other side, who is gawkily hungry for her. They are kept apart ridiculously, but inexorably, as huge spaces keep apart Susanna and the old men, and David and Abigail.

These recurrences may have emerged from the artist’s personal life, as well as being important for his audience. The astonishing thing is that Lucas was a prodigy, producing many of these prints when he was only fourteen. This is precocious, although it is not as precocious as it would be today: in the sixteenth century it was quite ordinary to be a master with a shop at nineteen. It helps when we know that Lucas was the son of an artist—with the same advantage the young Picasso had, to cite only one example—and that his printmaking medium places a special value on technical excellence, where prodigies often make their mark, as with violins and computers. If we imagine an adolescent monopolized by dreams of girls, who was also a genius at articulating those feelings, perhaps we can come close to him. But we also need to know about how such works reached a public. Dürer was his own publisher, Breughel worked with a publisher; the marketing of prints was similar to that of books, and may have been helped by an author whose talent created fans. These are among the many problems that remain for art historians who will teach us about Lucas van Leyden.

The American Corinne

The Letters of Margaret Fuller.
Volume I (1817-38), Volume II
(1839-41), Volume III (1842-44).
Edited by Robert N. Hudspeth. Cornell
University Press, \$25 (each volume)

reviewed by James W. Tuttleton

Margaret Fuller (1810-1850) is without question one of the most fascinating and provocative women of nineteenth-century America. She deserves to be better known than she is, for her contribution was significant—in the areas of Transcendental thought, American feminism, and newspaper and magazine journalism.

During the period covered by the present volumes of letters, Fuller grew up in Massachusetts, taught young ladies, dazzled her contemporaries with formidable learning, conducted “conversations” (or consciousness-raising sessions) with Transcendental women, edited (with Emerson) *The Dial*, and, after moving on to New York, served as literary editor for Horace Greeley’s *New-York Daily Tribune*. After 1844 she travelled in Europe, lived in Italy, became involved with the revolutionaries attached to Mazzini, bore a perhaps illegitimate child to the rebel nobleman Ossoli, and—after the collapse of the first campaign of the Risorgimento—returned to America. On the return voyage, Margaret, the Marquis Ossoli, and their child Angelo were shipwrecked and drowned off Fire Island, New York. She was forty years old.

The editor of the letters, Robert N. Hudspeth, has quite rightly claimed that this edition will present Fuller in a new light. Even so, I think it doubtful that Fuller’s letters are “the best means we have of capturing the whole of her diverse personality.” A distinctive personality emerges here, but it is not the whole Fuller. It is not, for example, the vivid Fuller to be found in her journals or in the testimony of her contemporaries. Nor is it the Fuller of the “Margaret cult” espoused in contemporary feminism. In fact, Fuller

disliked what she called “the epistolary medium” because it “does not refresh like conversation, it does not stimulate, like good serious study or writing.” Only the letters describing her travels in the West, written in 1843, have any literary merit. And although she was the author or translator of several books—*Eckermann’s Conversations with Goethe* (1839), *Günderode* (1842), *Summer on the Lakes* (1844), *Papers on Literature and Art* (1846), and *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845)—only the last survives, principally as a sacred unread text in the women’s movement.

Fuller was essentially a talker, rather than a writer. Henry James called her a dazzling moral improvisatrice who “left nothing behind her, her written utterance being naught.” This is perhaps too harsh, but even her close friend Elizabeth Barrett Browning remarked that “If I wished anyone to do her justice, I should say, as I have indeed said, ‘Never read what she has written.’” The judgment of Eleanor Roosevelt, in an introduction to Margaret Bell’s 1930 biography of Fuller, seems as true of the letters as of Fuller’s other prose: “To us to-day much of what she said and wrote seems pedantic and the language, which was that of the scholar of her day, smacks somewhat of the Blue Stocking.” Fuller is thus not a great stylist whose letters give unalloyed pleasure. But we do find in the correspondence what Roosevelt called the “enthusiasm for greatness of mind and soul” typical of everything that Margaret Fuller wrote.

The principal value of this edition of letters is the light it throws on Fuller’s sense of herself as a woman, defining herself against the constraints of a patriarchal society. In her childhood, her father Timothy Fuller provided her with a thorough education in languages and literature, philosophy, history, and religion. His regimen was demanding and, since she deeply loved him, she was overly conscientious, with the effect that she developed lifelong splitting headaches and suffered terrifying nightmares. She was later to criticize her father’s educational system

as tyrannical, but it was no different from that regularly imposed on boys; and, in any case, it prepared her for a life of literature and criticism. Among women she had few intellectual equals in the 1830s and 1840s.

In her youth, like many Transcendentalists, she proclaimed an Emersonian self-reliance that endeared her to her women students but that made her seem arrogant to very nearly every male acquaintance. According to Hawthorne, Emerson “apotheosized her as the greatest woman . . . of ancient or modern times, and the one figure in the world worth considering.” But she could stun Emerson by announcing matter-of-factly that “I now know all the people worth knowing in America, and I find no intellect comparable to my own”; and she could casually observe that “I myself am more divine than any I see.” Such doting on herself might have charmed Whitman, but this celebration of the self repelled Elizabeth Peabody and Hawthorne, Thoreau and James Russell Lowell, the latter satirizing her extravagantly in *A Fable for Critics* for her “I-turn-the-crank-of-the-Universe air.”

Fuller’s sublime egotism is tempered in these letters. We do not find here many of those outrageous expressions of “mountainous *me*” that stupefied her contemporaries. (On reflection, she blithely told Carlyle, for instance, “I accept the Universe,” to which he retorted, “By Gad, she’d better.”) Nor do we find here much of that bizarre gender confusion evident in her private journal. For whatever reasons, Fuller split herself into a masculine and a feminine identity, associating passion and feeling with her womanhood and the life of the intellect with a masculine self. Hers was not the usual androgynous sensibility, often acclaimed in feminist criticism, but evidence of a deeply disturbed psychosexual maladjustment. We will not find in the letters, for example, the acknowledgment in the journal that “It is so true that a woman may be in love with a woman, and a man with a man. I like to be sure of it, for it is the same which angels feel.” To be sure of it meant abandoning her usual “refuge in the All,” but the risks

seemed instructive. Her passionate involvement with some of the girls in her class produced such perfervid and rapturous effects that the saintly Emerson uneasily recorded that her female friendships were "not unmingled with passion, and had passages of romantic sacrifice and of ecstatic fusion, which I have heard with the ear, but could not trust my profane pen to report."

So tinged with erotic seduction was Fuller's teaching that one of her female students later remarked: "Had she been a man, any one of those fine girls of sixteen, who surrounded her here, would have married her: they were all in love with her, she understood them so well." Ultimately, Fuller came to realize that the incipient, if not enacted, lesbianism of such feelings could destroy her, and after a tempestuous breakup with her friend Caroline Sturgis they reconstructed a relationship that Fuller described as "redeemed from the search after Eros."

Yet Eros was *the* driving, well-nigh uncontrolled energy in this woman. One of the great catastrophes of her life was rejection in love by Samuel Ward, who decided to marry Anna Barker, a mutual friend to whom Margaret also had a passionate erotic attachment. She marveled at George Sand's insight into "the life of thought" and concluded "She must know it through some man." And a continuing refrain in these letters is her yearning for someone who could give her this insight. She told F. H. Hedge that she longed "to pour out my soul to some person of superior calmness and strength and fortunate in more accurate knowledge. I should feel such a quieting reaction." Only Goethe, she thought, had a mind equal to her own—and passion too, for his amorous liaisons were absorbing to her and she begged all the men she knew for more information about his affairs, ostensibly for a biography, which she never completed. But such things could not be openly or comfortably disclosed to an unmarried woman.

Emerson, though an ex-minister, a married man, and a father, was next best to Goethe, as the pivotal mind of his time. And

Fuller intrigued to meet him and tried desperately to seduce him, at least intellectually, with a voracious energy that went beyond the Romantic Cult of Friendship. In the fall of 1840, both she and Caroline Sturgis, in a bizarre triangle, pursued Emerson to the brink of Eros. In his private journal, Emerson spoke to Fuller with a directness not evident in their letters:

You would have me love you. What shall I love? Your body? The supposition disgusts you. What you have thought and said? Well, whilst you were thinking and saying them, but not now. I see no possibility of loving anything but what now is, and is becoming; your courage, your enterprise, your budding affection, your opening thought, your prayer. I can love, but what else?

It was always that "what else" that Fuller required. Frustrated by his lofty ministerial reserve, she complained of his "use" of the instincts "rather for rejection than reception," and his failure to offer her "the clue of the labyrinth of [her] own being." Thinking that she wanted power over him, he called a temporary halt to their correspondence.

Resigned to being bright and ugly, and fascinated by Mary Magdalen, George Sand, Goethe's mistresses, and Madame de Staël's *Corinne*, Fuller abandoned New England, where men seemed full of "petty intellectualities, cant and bloodless theory." As she had said to Almira P. Barlow, "I am more and more dissatisfied with this world, and *cannot* find a home in it."

Fuller's departure for New York, to write for Horace Greeley's newspaper, was seen in Boston and Concord as a dangerous test of constraining ethical standards, and her social work with "fallen women" in Sing Sing prison seemed a doubtful project in political journalism for a woman who had shown no interest whatsoever in the New England abolition movement then raging. The Englishwoman Harriet Martineau expressed this criticism perhaps most acidulously in her *Autobiography*, where she contrasted herself and Fuller on the issue of antislavery:

The difference between us was that while she was living and moving in an ideal world, talking in private and discoursing in public about the most fanciful and shallow conceits which the transcendentalists of Boston took for philosophy, she looked down upon persons who acted instead of talking finely, and devoted their fortunes, their peace, their repose, and their very lives to the preservation of the principles of the republic.

But abolition was not Fuller's issue, a fact that seemed paradoxical to her friends.

More urgent to Fuller was a serious redefinition of the role of women in society, and she was unwilling to postpone it until after the emancipation of blacks. "We would have every arbitrary barrier thrown down," she wrote in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. "We would have every path laid open to Woman as freely as to Man." This sounds promising, and is written with force. But then she takes off into the Transcendental gas: "Were this done, and a slight temporary fermentation allowed to subside, we should see crystallizations more pure and of more various beauty. We believe the divine energy would pervade nature to a degree unknown in the history of former ages, and that no discordant collision, but a ravishing harmony of the spheres, would ensue."

Such crystallizations were not imminent in New England, nor were they likely even in New York. Nor, finally, could she even focus on this issue. Like most of the Transcendental crowd, she had no vocation. In Italy, in the revolutions of 1848, she found another public issue. From Transcendental Individualist and Feminist she passed on to the role of "enthusiastic Socialist." Italy offered her the final field for her intellectual and sexual radicalism.

Even from afar, however, Fuller was a scandal in New England. For the news about Margaret, reported back to Concord, was that she and her ostensible husband Ossoli, ten years her junior, had never really been married—or, if so, only after the birth of their child. Emerson insisted that her criticism of marriage as an institution was

merely theoretic and that, when she returned, a license would be produced. Others weren't so sure, and tongues wagged in Boston. Of course the shipwreck destroyed any evidence that might have resolved the question. (Thoreau was sent down to Fire Island to recover the Ossolis' bodies and their belongings, but only the child Angelo was washed ashore.) Hawthorne was convinced that the Ossoli business was the final evidence of Fuller's collapse into sensuality; and his *Zenobia*, in *The Blithedale Romance*, was a cautionary instance of the fate of sexual irregularity in woman in the nineteenth century. Holmes's *Elsie Venner*, if not James's *The Bostonians*, may also owe something to the memory of this extraordinary woman, the American Corinne. In any case, these letters—wonderfully annotated and scrupulously edited from sometimes mutilated and even bowdlerized texts—recover for us a Margaret Fuller who was at once the intellectual wonder and the sexual terror of her age. They re-animate the "Margaret-ghost" that—as Henry James observed in his life of William Wetmore Story—still haunted the New England mind a half century later.

Christ made male

Leo Steinberg The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion. Pantheon, 222 pages, \$19.95

reviewed by Charles Dempsey

In the conclusion to the *Decameron* Boccaccio writes that there will be some hypocritical lady who will no doubt take exception to his use of certain little everyday words, like "hole" and "peg," "mortar and pestle," and "sausage." But surely, he goes on, he should be allowed the same freedom as the painter. No one objects if the painter makes St. George or St. Michael strike the dragon with a "sword" or a "spear," and "wherever he pleases." Indeed, the painter "makes Christ male and Eve female, and the feet of Him himself, who wished to die for the sal-

vation of humankind upon the cross, he attaches to the cross sometimes with one nail and sometimes with two."

This passage has always been troubling to Boccaccio's editors, especially the phrase "Christ male and Eve female." Counter-Reformation editors in fact emended "Christ" to "Adam" in order to establish the more suitable counterpart to Eve, and above all to expunge the direct reference to Christ's masculinity, his sexuality. The manuscripts of the *Decameron* do not support them. What is more, as Charles Singleton has shown, one of these manuscripts, in Berlin, is a holograph by Boccaccio himself, copied out by him in old age, and in that manuscript the words "Cristo maschio ed Eva femina" appear.

Now, what are we to make of Boccaccio's statement that painters freely made the male Christ? Does he really mean to say that they depicted a Christ who is male in the same sense that Eve is female—a Christ, in other words, who is characterized by his carnality? This is a question that far transcends the objections of "hypocritical ladies." It touches upon the most fundamental of Christian mysteries, the meaning of the Incarnation, of God assuming flesh, of God made into man.

Until recently the material necessary to think intelligently about the answer had scarcely been assembled. This was because of the prevailing view, inherited from the days of the Reformation, that in the Renaissance an increasingly secularized Italian clergy was less interested in theological issues than in worldly pursuits. The art it so lavishly patronized, rooted in naturalism and in pagan antiquity, seemed to support this view. Religious thought in Renaissance Italy was accordingly regarded as neither interesting nor novel. Even more important, the values of religion were perceived to be intellectually and culturally distinct from the values of humanism as expressed in such famous works as Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man*.

Recent distinguished work by historians like Charles Trinkaus, Salvatore Camporeale, and John O'Malley has seriously under-

mined this position. It now appears that a distinctively original theology of the Incarnation was developed in Renaissance Italy. Taking as its point of departure the theology of Aquinas, together with the spiritualism of St. Francis (who meditated deeply on the humanity of Christ), this new theology was established in a line convergent with the growth of humanism. However we may wish to name it, "incarnationist theology" (O'Malley) or "humanist theology" (Camporeale) adopted the purified language and literary forms of humanist expression and placed special emphasis on the redemptive efficacy of the moment of the Incarnation itself. Humanity was redeemed, at least potentially, at the moment God assumed human flesh and became one with man. The emphasis is important, for in substance as well as in formal expression religious thought and humanist thought about the dignity of man can be seen to be much more closely aligned than they were once thought to be. Attention was directed not only toward redemption achieved through Christ's death on the cross but also toward the value of human life itself, the perfectibility of which had been sanctioned by Christ's appearance on the earth as man.

To assume human flesh means, among other things, to acquire sexuality. This aspect of Christ's humanity is the subject of Leo Steinberg's *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*. The text, which originated as Lionel Trilling Seminar at Columbia University, is of essay length (with forty appended excursions, many of them highly entertaining) and easily absorbed in a single sitting. It is devoted to the ways in which Renaissance artists drew particular attention to Christ's genitalia, whether by using compositional devices that emphasize them, by showing the Virgin or Christ himself unveiling them, or by directing the glances and gestures of subsidiary figures toward them in such a way that they gaze fully upon them, point toward them, and sometimes even touch them. The foundation to Steinberg's argument is no more

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complex than that, and since the book is densely illustrated the reader can easily verify for himself the validity of his observations. In my opinion many of his examples are forced, but at the same time more than enough are sufficiently explicit to establish his case. It has been known for a long time, for example, that the infant Christ was portrayed clothed until sometime in the fourteenth century, after which it became customary to show him naked and male. Many paintings of the period, such as the frescoes by Barna and others in San Gimignano, are surprisingly frank in depicting the nudity of sacred figures. It has also been known that many works of art were either destroyed, mutilated, or given loincloths during the Counter-Reformation in order to hide the fact of Christ's maleness. Michelangelo's *Risen Christ* in the church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva in Rome is only one of the most famous examples of such ecclesiastical interference. The statue is also so glaringly and so full-frontally naked in its original state that it still possesses the power to

shock. Clearly the phenomenon of Christ's sexuality is a real one that demands explanation.

The Sexuality of Christ differs significantly from Steinberg's earlier and well-known studies of the art of Michelangelo. In those studies he applied methods of psychological, formal, and iconographical analysis in an insufficiently integrated and hence rather eclectic attempt to broaden his investigation. While nothing written by so fluent an intelligence as Steinberg's can fail to produce moments of insight, the unfortunate result was the creation of a Michelangelo capable of genuine blasphemy in the Florentine *Pietà* (of which Steinberg argued that Christ the bridegroom literally consummates his marriage to Mary as the Church), and outright heresy in the *Last Judgment* (of which he suggested that Michelangelo denied Christ's punishment of sin). By applying in crudely literal form certain concepts of a modern determinist historiography, and specifically concepts informed by Freudian method, Steinberg succeeded in offending

against the personal convictions and the very religion of the historical Michelangelo. Michelangelo himself most heroically affirmed in his life and art his own belief in the freedom of the human will and in the dignity of man. And he affirmed it moreover in the face of the forces implacably arrayed against humanism, forces that hurled against him the same charges of blasphemy and heresy and that disfigured his art by covering the majestic nudity of his figures with loincloths.

In *The Sexuality of Christ*, however, Steinberg attempts to deepen his investigation by submitting to the rigors of a more focused method. He avoids appeal to psychological methods of analysis in order to base his argument in the material of intellectual history and its direct expression in the works of art. The result is a conventional iconographic study, on the pattern of Erwin Panofsky or Edgar Wind, devoted to the explication of the theme of Christ's sexuality as it was consciously expressed by artists, and as it reflects the mature thought of serious men during the period of a developing humanist culture. Steinberg has made it possible for us to begin to grasp not only the real implications of Michelangelo's achievement at the end of the Renaissance, but also the full import of Boccaccio's statement at its beginning—that the painter has the freedom to make Christ male and Eve female. To begin to understand these things is to have learned something fundamental about Renaissance art and the culture that produced it.

Steinberg's iconographical analysis is sound as far as it goes. It is, however, only a beginning, and as such tends to be one-dimensional. For him the representation of Christ's humanity is limited to Christ's sexuality, which in turn is pretty well limited to Christ's genitals. The censors of the Counter-Reformation also reduced the humanist conception of the Incarnation in this way, and it is a representation of humanist theology that borders on caricature. Steinberg also tends to treat theology monolithically, so that the reader loses a sense of the signifi-

cance of doctrinal debate. His argument depends greatly on the theology of the Circumcision, for example, as the moment when Christ first shed blood for man and gave proof against all doubters that God truly had taken on flesh. This is correct, though one may question whether it is also correct to stress the significance of Christ's penis over the shedding of his blood in giving proof of his humanity. Moreover, the Circumcision is quite rare as a subject in Renaissance painting (Steinberg reproduces but one example, by Mantegna, though there are more, and earlier), while it is a major subject in painting after the Renaissance. This is because Christ was given the name of Jesus at the time of his circumcision, and the Jesuits, established in 1540 and the most important of all the Counter-Reformation orders, were dedicated to the holy name of Jesus. The theme of the Circumcision is ubiquitous in their churches, and yet its treatment, far from emphasizing the genitals of Christ, instead almost invariably emphasizes qualities that may be identified with a sacramentalist theology. A magnificent depiction of the subject by Federico Barocci, now in the Louvre, is typical of such Jesuit paintings in that the nakedness of the infant is not made explicit, while at the same time attention is carefully drawn toward an exquisite rendering of a single drop of blood floating in a bowl of water placed by the rabbi's side.

Despite the narrowness of his focus, Steinberg has unclosed a fundamental subject, a subject which art historians have not been uncomplacitous in keeping hidden. The influence his book is going to have is going to depend upon how intelligently readers respond to his virtual identification of the mystery of the Incarnation with the sexuality of Christ. The Incarnation instead has to do with the human nature of Christ, the Word made flesh. The Catholic view is that Christ became man in every respect except the capacity to sin. His manhood includes sexuality certainly, but it also includes all the other bodily weaknesses to which flesh is heir, such as hunger, pain, and death, as well

as desires, ambitions, affections, emotions, and in short all those things which, as St. Paul put it, partake of the corruptibility of flesh. What makes Renaissance speculation on the humanity of Christ so interesting, and inspiring, is its turning away from the Pauline-Augustinian emphasis on corruptibility toward an ennobling concept of *humanitas*. It is from this concept, nurtured especially in that branch of the university called the *studia humanitatis*, that humanism took its name. It refers to an ideal of man that had supposedly been attained by the superior culture of the ancients, an ideal that had been redeemed by Christ's appearance on earth in the age of Augustus. "Look to philosophy," wrote Leonardo Bruni around 1401, "so that we may most powerfully consider that which is the mother of all the liberal arts, and from whose wellsprings arises all our *humanitas*; look to philosophy, which Cicero brought to Italy from Greece and watered from the golden river of his eloquence." By such study mankind might re-acquire the *virtù*, literally the "manliness," of the ancients, expressed by them in the perfection (*integritas*) of their arts and their philosophy.

Such was the humanity that Christ assumed, and such was the perfected and whole man that was redeemed when the Word became flesh. Bruni's emphasis on eloquence is also fundamental to humanism, which elevated rhetoric to a species of true philosophical discourse, an expression of *virtù* superior to the logical dialectic and bad Latin of scholastic reasoning. Truth was not simply a matter for demonstration, but something to be made wholly manifest and praised. And such is the manifestation of God become man celebrated by Michelangelo in the perfected antique forms, the marble eloquence of the *Risen Christ*, resplendently and unselfconsciously naked, perfect in every detail.

We do not see that perfection now. The Church has never found it appropriate to remove the loincloth added to the *Risen Christ* during the Counter-Reformation, any

more than it has seen fit to remove those covering the risen bodies of men in Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*. Christ's manhood, in other words, is perceived now as it was then, as something shameful with regard to his sex, and something shamefully represented by Michelangelo in his glorification of Christ's perfected and whole humanity. Vasari wrote directly to this point, and in so doing gave perfect expression to the humanist aesthetic:

One does see religious works made by people who little believe in or esteem religion which often arouse dishonest appetites and bring lascivious thoughts into the mind; whence arises censure for their dishonesty together with praise for their skill and ability as artists. But I would never wish that anyone deceive himself by calling crude and inept works devout, and beautiful and good things licentious. This is the false interpretation of many who, when they see feminine and youthful figures adorned with more than common loveliness and beauty, immediately censure them as licentious. They do not understand how wrongly they condemn the good judgment of the painter, who maintains that the saints, male and female, are celestial and therefore as much more beautiful than mortal humanity as heaven itself surpasses the beauty of earth and things made by human hands. What is worse, they betray the impurity and corruption of their own minds by thus discovering wicked and lascivious desires in the very things which, were they truly lovers of the good (as by their stupid zealotry they wish to appear), should awaken in them a desire for heaven and a wish to make themselves acceptable to the Creator of all things—from whom, being Himself most perfect and most beautiful, arises every perfection and every beauty.

Vasari wrote those words in 1550, and the zealots to whom he refers are the censors of the Counter-Reformation, the inventors of the fig leaf and the bowdlerizers of Boccaccio. Vasari points out that even so saintly a painter as Fra Angelico painted an *Annunciation* with Adam and Eve in the background

because he wanted to show in the very moment of the Incarnation itself that "they were the reason that the Redeemer was incarnated in the blood of the Virgin." Nevertheless, Boccaccio's juxtaposition in the *Decameron* of Christ male to Eve female was too much for his editors, and the representation of Christ's most perfect and most beautiful manliness too shameful for the guardians of the new morality. His nudity was cloaked in hundreds of instances, and with it was cloaked something of far greater importance, an idea of human freedom and dignity.

Steinberg has opened up for us an important pathway by which we may begin to recover that idea, but he has not himself taken the first steps down it. This is because his conception of Christ's humanity is limited to the kind of genital fixation that also obsessed Counter-Reformation censors. To say that Steinberg has succeeded in recovering the critical perception of a conservative sixteenth-century bishop may seem faint praise, but by unveiling what that bishop sought to cover he has performed a valuable service. It is generally true that what we cannot articulate about a work of art we cannot be said to have seen; just as the converse is true, that we tend to see in a work of art that which has been characterized, rightly or wrongly, in words.

Steinberg has made it possible for us to see that which has not been seen, precisely because it seemed unthinkable in religious art, so completely did the enemies of humanism extinguish its religious values. It is no revelation to be told that the infant Christ often appears naked and sexed in Renaissance art. It does, however, change our perception of that art to learn that the very fact of his nakedness, and indeed his maleness, accounts for the ways in which many paintings are conceived and organized. Gestures that had seemed motivated only by abstract "artistic" impulses, such as that of the infant St. John in Bronzino's *Holy Family* in the Louvre, and actions that had seemed only formal inventions, such as the way the Madonna displays the transpar-

ent veil revealing Christ's nudity in Antoniazio Romano's *Madonna and Child* in Fondi, acquire a hitherto unseen dramatic and psychological coherence. This represents a real critical gain. In the same way, Steinberg's drawing attention to the significance of representing Christ's genitals represents a real gain in historical understanding, despite the fact that to make of them the emblem of human good misrepresents humanist religious thought in exactly the same sense as did its Pauline enemies, who found in them the emblem of sin.

Yet, the old ghosts still haunt us. In the present year, 1984, Don Salvatore Zappalà, parish priest of the town of Calatabanio in Catania, ordered that the sex of all the infant angels in the local churches be covered. This insult to his parishioners and to the piety of the dead sculptors was rightly protested by a famous art historian, Federico Zeri, with the following poem:

Animule vâgule blândule
se vi offendon le glândule pëndule
ostentate dagli Angioletti, nei cori
eseguiti da antichi scultori:
alla vostra tranquillità
pensa Don Salvatore Zappalà,
che con abbondanti mutândole
coprirà quelle offensive glândule,
a maggior divina gloria
(un Pater, un Ave e una giaculatoria).

The poem is untranslatable, but may be paraphrased as follows: "You sweet little unblemished spirits, if you are offended by the hanging little glands displayed by the infant angels in the choirs made by the old sculptors, Don Salvatore Zappalà is concerned for your peace of mind; for with abundant underwear he will cover up those offensive little glands for the greater glory of God (an Our Father, a Hail Mary, and an ejaculatory prayer)." Never think that Leo Steinberg is alone in noticing those little glands. We may be grateful to him for reminding us just how important they really are.

Hippique Buddha

Harold Stearns The Confessions of a Harvard Man. Paget Press, 423 pages, \$15

reviewed by Philip Young

There is a mystery about these memoirs, hence their author. Harold Stearns, “splendidly endowed and so promising” (William Shirer’s opinion was typical), was once well known as a New York writer and intellectual. He was even better known as editor of an indictment, full of prominent contributors, called *Civilization in the United States* (1922)—also for delivering the manuscript of this book to the publisher and immediately boarding the *Berengaria* on the Fourth of July, 1921, in the vanguard of the American exodus to Paris, where he spent thirteen years. Next he appears as a standard piece of Left Bank scenery—the ghost of Greenwich Village, drunk, shabby, broke, alone. A. J. Liebling pegged him as the non-writing writer “hanging on the bar like a crook-handled cane.” Dozing at the Dôme, he was wide open to “There lies civilization in the United States.” Stearns had been editor of *The Dial*, had written a couple of books, and would write three more on his repatriation. Today he is most often recalled under another name—as encountered early in *The Sun Also Rises* by Jake Barnes. Jake says he “walked past the sad tables of the Rotonde to the Sélect . . . and outside, alone, sat Harvey Stone. He had a pile of saucers in front of him, and he needed a shave.” (He was called Harold Stearns in the book until Hemingway, at Fitzgerald’s urging, changed it at the last minute in galleys.) Harvey tells Jake he hasn’t eaten in five days. Jake gives him a hundred francs. Harvey says “When I’m like this I just want . . . to stay in my own room. I’m like a cat that way.” Forty pages later Jake runs into Bill Gorton, who says “If I begin to feel daunted I’ll go off by myself. I’m like a cat that way.” “When did you see Harvey Stone?” Jake says. “At the Crillon,” Bill says. “Hadn’t eaten anything

for three days . . . Just goes off like a cat.”

B. D. Sarason, an historian of the matter, declares that only one bent on “saddism” could have made such a target of Stearns. In writing his memoirs—originally called *The Street I Know* (1935) and now reissued under a title he had used for a very early essay—did the target emerge from Hemingway’s novel to improve his position, maybe shoot back? On the contrary. Stearns’s advice is, “Read the first part of Hemingway’s ‘The Sun Also Rises’ to get a vivid picture of that era in Montparnasse.” What *he* remembers of drinking with Madame Sélect is how she “would pile my saucers at the end of the bar, sometimes until they almost touched the ceiling.” As for Hemingway, Stearns is simply grateful. “He did what he could—that is, he got my typewriter out of pawn, gave me some cash, paid for my hotel, and tried to suggest one or two possible markets for some articles . . . He has never ‘let me down’; and, what I think I like best of all, he has always been honest with me.” Jake says of Stone: “I like him. I’m fond of him.” Just before his novel was published, Hemingway expanded on this in a letter to Fitzgerald:

I’m sorry as hell for HS but there’s nothing anybody can do for him except give him money and be nice to him . . . He lives altogether in his imagination. The poor old bastard . . . Panhandling is no damned fun. A gent who is drinking himself to death ought not to be constantly having to raise the funds to do it with. I do think Harold had a pretty damned good head. Also think he destroyed it or completely coated it with fuzz by drinking. But I couldn’t sleep if I hurt his feelings.

Aside from drinking, and supporting himself, so to speak, in journalism, it is hard to tell from the *Confessions* what, if anything, Stearns was up to in Paris. His generation wasn’t really lost, but he was. Classically lost, as he admits: aimless, uprooted, lonely. (“Since there was nothing else to do, I would go into the bar and take another drink.”) He was at least half an orphan from the day he was born in a small town out-

side Boston in 1891; his father had died, his mother couldn't keep a family together. A bright and studious boy, he was barely into long pants at sixteen when he began reviewing plays and books for the Boston *Transcript*. With the financial help someone was forever providing he went in three years through Harvard at its peak. Names he cites are James, Royce, Santayana (his favorite); "Copey" and Kittredge, Irving Babbitt and Barrett Wendell; Bliss Perry and Ralph Barton Perry and William Allen Neilson. He got the best of it, with honors. Within another year, he was moving up in the lower ranks of the New York newspaper world. He managed a trip to London, where Somerset Maugham, whom he'd once interviewed, took him in, gave him money, bought him clothes (people were always doing this), and showed him about. He went with Walter Lippmann on a short excursion to Paris. Later Sinclair Lewis gave him money for another, and this time he stayed five years.

In Paris there was occasional thought, no more, of "serious work" (apparently a book on Rabelais, which was eventually written, as he does not say, by his friend Albert Jay Nock). He was equipped for serious work: what went wrong? He never addresses the question. He shows no sign of thinking the trouble was alcohol. He does once say that when he lost the dearest of "life's realities" he could no longer feel "genuine impulse of ambition or desire." The reference is to Alice Macdougall, his young wife who died shortly after bearing his child. But there is *unreality* about this tragedy, as about much of his life as he relates it. When in New York he and Alice married they decided not to live together; first both should be more settled in "plans of future work." Both kept their apartments. When it was nearing time for the baby, Alice went alone to California to be with her mother. A son survived; years later, Stearns visited him.

Big league drinking had already begun. At "Ike's" near the Harvard Club on Forty-fourth Street one could get two large Bronx cocktails for a quarter. A dollar would fetch a dozen. Apparently it did. Still in New York

after Alice's death, "I looked conventional and even dull. But the plain truth is I was drunk all the time." Later, abroad, things remained unreal. "I was marking time; life was just going by, and . . . I could say with the French *La vie passe comme un rêve à Paris*."

Parts of the dream were pleasant. Stearns loved the horses, and went to the track every day in the professional role of "Peter Pickem" of the Paris *Tribune*, later "Lutetius" of the London *Daily Mail*. Because of his inscrutable silences and paradoxical dignity, it is recorded elsewhere, fellow newsmen called him "Hippique [horseracing] Buddha." Now he asks: "How could one be bored or miserable?" He had work, a girl ("brilliant and amusing and pretty"), and a city to explore. He had a series of pretty girls, and they were good to him.¹ Chief of these was "Joan" (Josephine Bennett), who said "I'll stake you to a trip to California" to see son Philip, now five, and still in the care of his grandparents. The visit proved a flop. Back in Paris he was "without a job or a friend or a woman to keep me." Whereupon Joan returned from a skiing trip with the Hemingways in Switzerland, and "Belinda" appeared. Joan entertained both her and Harold. And Belinda, "in the language of those neo-speakeasy days, was 'lousy' with money." When *she* moved on she left Harold enough "for a few weeks."

It was at this point that a *rêve* turned to *cauchemar*. It happened in a press box during the races. "I went blind. Everything turned grey-black." Sight came back imperfectly. And then in the middle of a busy Paris street at rush hour it happened again. Partial vision returned again, but he was broke and worse—he could not work. People who saw him night after night piling up saucers, he points out, did not stop to think that he had

1 In 1937, two years after this book was first published, Stearns married Elizabeth Chapin. She was a "cultivated and wealthy divorcée," according to Hugh Ford in his introduction to the present edition, who opened to him "her palatial 18th-century home in Locust Valley [Long Island]."

been every day at the races, "from one o'clock in the afternoon until half-past eight in the evening with no let-up . . . seven days [a week] for months on end." Now he could not always tell where he had passed the night; sometimes it was on "one of those low benches along the Boulevard Montparnasse near the church." Occasionally, shocked by his appearance, someone would put up money for a meal. Finally he was taken to the American Hospital, where "diagnosis proved what I had always known"—an odd confession—"I was being poisoned by my teeth."

No job, no money, no girl, no teeth. All Paris soured. A friend got him a passport. American Aid booked him on a freighter that took passengers. He came home to get new teeth, he says, adding—as if at the thought of losing the old ones—the suspicion that "henceforth my interest in girls would be largely academic" ("as most certainly it has proved to be"). He was forty-four. He arrived at Hoboken "literally without a dime" or cigarettes.

In an introduction to the new edition of this book, Hugh Ford claims that Stearns's "forgotten autobiography is a study of failure, a dissection of lostness . . . and a celebration of recovery." Walter Duranty did buy him a set of teeth and a typewriter. And these memoirs were written—in "the Village," at 10 Charles Street. It was a very small recovery (the book "is not much, I know"). And there was simply no celebration. "Even the shoes I had on my feet were borrowed . . . Nothing of my own, no dignity, no security, no convictions, no happiness." At the close, when he waxes philosophical—waning is better—the message is close to meaningless. An exception is the final word on expatriation: "We are homeless enough in this world . . . without going to any special effort to test our ability to be more so." The last thoughts on life, death, and immortality *are* meaningful.

Unhorsed, Buddha is still inscrutable. A concluding mystery relates to his prose. "Highly self-conscious" about style since boyhood, Stearns is not inhibited from writing things like "Many people have their own

memory of Greenwich Village," or "We cannot help dying, perhaps." On his typewriter, "myself" makes do for "me," "mine," even "I" ("the prices Joan and myself had paid"). As a hedge against prohibition he acquired, because it was cheap, "a case of all the liquors in the world which I really detest, apricot brandy." Speaking of drinks, he can still write *Pernot* after thirteen years in Paris. And then, to show it was no slip, thinks of getting drunk on *Pernot* "in a Paris 'bistrot.'"

What to make of Harold Stearns? One might turn to *Monday Night* (1938), a novel Kay Boyle wrote about him. But it is a hallucinated, Faulknerian tale, vaguely allegorical, and except for details of physical appearance it is hard to see the man in her drunken-Samaritan protagonist, divinity in a dive. It is hard to see the man in his autobiography, as if he failed to get inside his subject. A profound numbness prevents it. Or, as Hemingway wrote sixty years ago, his head is coated with fuzz. This book will help feed the American appetite for memoirs of Paris in the Twenties. It tells more about its author than will be found elsewhere. But there is never a glimpse of the imagination where Hemingway said he lived.

Humanist and scholar

E. H. Gombrich Tributes: Interpreters of our Cultural Tradition. Cornell University Press, 270 pages, \$34.95

reviewed by René Wellek

Ernst Hans Gombrich was born in Vienna in 1909. After the First World War, he studied art history at the University under Julius von Schlosser. Among his fellow students were Ernst Kris, nine years his senior, and Otto Kurz, older by one year. As the Nazi menace grew, he welcomed the help of Dr. Kris, who secured him a position at the Warburg Institute in 1935. It had managed to move from Hamburg to London in December 1933. It was there that Gombrich,

after interruptions caused by the war, established his reputation, mainly with *Art and Illusion* (1960). He rose to become the Director of the Institute from 1953, a position he held until his retirement in 1976. He was knighted in 1972.

Tributes collects Gombrich's addresses and lectures: generous tributes to his friends and colleagues at the Warburg Institute and to the Institute's founder, Aby Warburg, whom Gombrich could not have known, since Warburg died in 1929. Gombrich has already devoted a large, fully documented monograph to Warburg with the subtitle, "An Intellectual Biography." The essay in this volume is a summary of Warburg's life story and of his immense work on the Italian Renaissance, which branched out into the history of mythology, astrology, and magic—subjects that are, after all, also part of the classical tradition to which Warburg devoted his magnificent library of some sixty thousand volumes. Gombrich emphasizes that, in spite of Warburg's interest in the "nightside" of culture, he remained a "champion of the enlightenment," a true humanist who had a "ruthless readiness to pass judgments also on historical events."

The appreciation of Gombrich's colleagues follows logically. Ernst Kris (1900-1957), whom Gombrich knew first as a curator of the collection of sculpture and applied art at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, became a psychoanalyst in New York. He wrote *Psychoanalytic Explorations of Art* (1952), one of the most perceptive books on the subject. Otto Kurz (1908-1975) joined the Warburg Institute in Hamburg even before its removal to London. "He was the only Jew to immigrate into Germany at the time of the Nazis," according to Gombrich. Much later he did important work, particularly on Islamic art. Frances A. Yates (1899-1981) was an Englishwoman on the staff of the Institute since 1936. Gombrich praises her staggering erudition, glossing over her excessive claims for the role of occultism, Rosicrucianism, and other obscurantist undercurrents of the Renaissance in the work of

Giordano Bruno and, even more doubtfully, Shakespeare.

This clearly defined group of tributes is flanked by quite different historical papers, which sometimes contain little surprises. One would expect a lecture on Lessing by an art historian to revolve around Lessing's *Laokoon*. It is, however, dismissed as "a book against the visual arts." The question whether the priest Laokoon on the Vatican sculpture groans or shouts is considered as pointless as "asking after the color of his hair." But Gombrich admires Lessing's criticism of literature and theology, his plays *Nathan the Wise* and *Minna von Barnhelm*, and above all his ethos, his relentless search for truth, his engagement in many causes.

Gombrich's lecture on Hegel, while arguing that Hegel, and not Winckelmann, was the father of art history, rejects not only Hegel's specific historical scheme but all concepts of historical development. Indeed, Gombrich is opposed to all historical determinism, whether Hegelian or Marxist. Gombrich, as he declared in *Ideas and Idols*, is a "rationalist but not a sceptic." He believes in tradition, in a canon of masterworks, in the moral responsibility to judge, rejecting the relativism that finds every period and style equal. But Gombrich is also an individualist who admires the towering artists of the past and is interested in the psychology of artistic creation. He admires Freud, but in the lecture reprinted here he stresses Freud's disclaimer that analysis could not "contribute to the explanation of the artist's gift or lay bare his artistic technique." Still, Gombrich considers *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious* "decisive for the theory of the arts," though he admits that Freud's adherence to the view identifying art with expression and communication made him underrate or ignore the role of tradition.

The essay on Johan Huizinga, the Dutch historian, is the most critical in the whole series. Gombrich admires *The Waning of the Middle Ages* because it turned the tables on Burckhardt's *Civilization of the Renaissance*,

arguing that the realism of the Van Eycks did not herald the Renaissance, but was rather the end, the autumn of the Middle Ages. But Gombrich became wary of Huizinga's later work: the wholesale condemnation of the modern world, of Freud, Marx, the United States, and the obscurities of *Homo Ludens*. Huizinga had become an "essentialist," a believer in the essence of the concept of play.

Gombrich appeals to Wittgenstein to uphold a nominalist view: words have no fixed meaning, they change in context and history. He dismisses as so many verbalisms both German *Geistesgeschichte*—the attempt to define the "spirit of the age"—and Wölfflin's division between Renaissance and Baroque. Gombrich's terms are very much those of Karl Popper in *The Poverty of Historicism*. This is one of the main reasons why he praises George Boas (1896-1980), who after Arthur O. Lovejoy was the founder of the peculiarly American version of the history of ideas that shuns the spirits of German *Geistesgeschichte* and works with the history of words, tracing their permutations and unraveling their deceptions. The memorial lecture devoted to Boas is inspired by deep affection for the man. Gombrich reviews admiringly his extensive work, though he ignores *The Primer for Critics* (1937), which is an extreme statement of historical relativism of which Gombrich could not approve.

Two essays in *Tributes* have little to do with their ostensible subjects. Lord Leverhulme (1851-1925), who had made a fortune with "Sunlight Soap," was a great philanthropist. In this lecture Gombrich can do little more than pick out a passage in his pronouncements that recommends the study of both nature and art as civilizing influences against the dangers of barbarism. Gombrich has a strong pedagogical vein; it shocks him that it is "possible, indeed likely, for a child to pass through school without hearing a piece by Mozart or seeing a work by Rembrandt in the classroom." He wants children to visit art museums and defends

general survey courses, since even a crude map is better than no map. Gombrich himself wrote *The Story of Art* to provide such an outline.

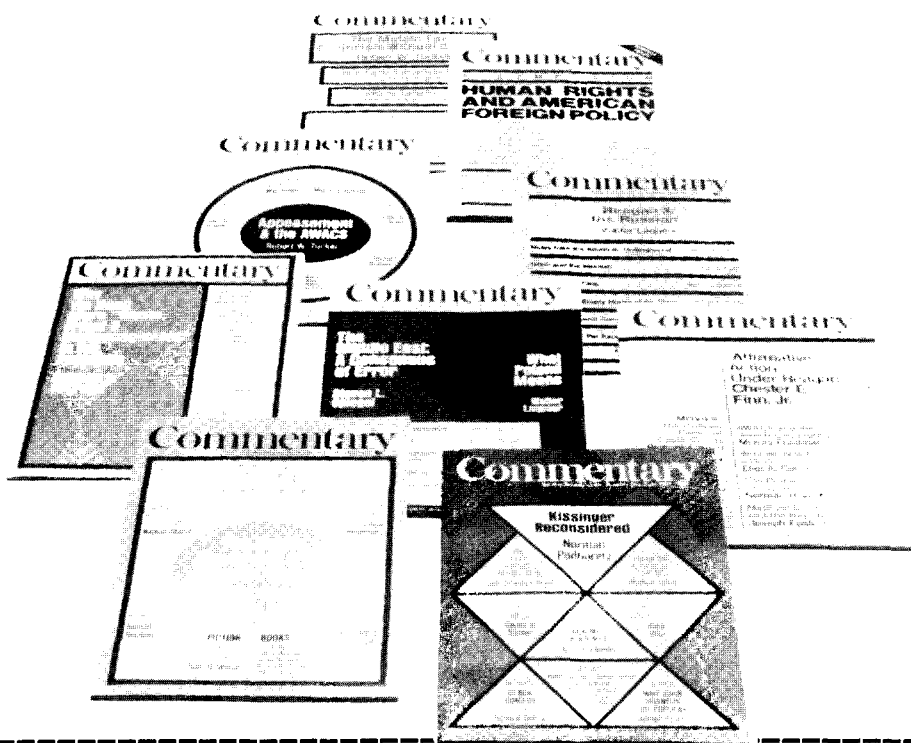
Gombrich's lecture on I. A. Richards (1893-1979) makes no effort to discuss his mind or work. Gombrich never even alludes to *The Principles of Literary Criticism* or *Practical Criticism*, but merely uses a passage from a sonnet sequence, which speaks of the mystery and regenerative power of language, to meditate on language, on the differences between languages, on their prescriptive and restrictive power, and on self-expression, which he argues is limited by the effect that a work has on the artist himself, especially on the artist's use of certain conventions. Gombrich calls this "feedback" and appeals to Richards to state that it is always the idiom that inspires the artist. Sensibly, Gombrich has it both ways: art is self-expression, but within a tradition of conventions and restraints imposed by the medium and, I daresay, by society, history, and even the "spirit of the age."

Tributes raises so many questions that we may at times miss fully argued answers. We should read the earlier writings of Gombrich, particularly *The Meditations on a Hobby Horse* and *Ideas and Idols*, to find the answers. The present book is necessarily miscellaneous and has no unifying theme except the one expressed by the title. It carries the imprint of Gombrich's personality—his generosity, his wide learning, and his affection and even reverence for his friends, predecessors, and the great masters of art. He eloquently defends the humanities in a speech before the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, "Focus on the Arts and Humanities," placed at the head of the volume. The humanities are for Gombrich the keepers of the tradition, the Memory of Mankind, and while he praises exact erudition and objective research, he warns of the greatest danger: the neglect and even denial of values. This is to him the "dehumanization of the humanities." Let us hope that his voice is not a voice in the wilderness.

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“Art” for the Eighties?

by Roger Kimball

Early this October, the International Center for Advanced Studies in Art—part of New York University’s Department of Art and Art Education—sponsored three public panel discussions under the general rubric “Art for the 80’s.” An adjunct to a graduate seminar in “Art and Ideas” that is given twice yearly by the International Center, “Art for the 80’s” has convened every fall and spring since 1981. This semester’s offering took the form of a question: “Should Artists Have the Last Word? A New Look at the Role of Critics and Art Historians.” The list of invited speakers included such notable figures in the contemporary art scene as the critic Leo Steinberg and the artist Leon Golub, and the advertised program was ambitious indeed. The first session was to plumb “The Collision Between Art and History: Does art exist for its own sake or does art have an impact on society and history?” The second, “Process or Object?” bore the subtitle “What is the ultimate significance of art?” And the third, confining itself to somewhat more parochial matters, was to be devoted to the question “Art or the Artist? Should art be evaluated in terms of the process that produced it, or only by the object that results from it?”

One may, I think, be forgiven certain qualms about the scope of the program. Public disputations on the “ultimate significance of art” and such are usually questionable guides to the significance of art, ultimate or otherwise. Still, it was difficult to

know exactly what to expect. The schedule and roster of speakers were not settled until the last moment, apparently, and I went with the impression that perhaps all of the dozen or so invited speakers would contribute to each of the discussions—a state of affairs that could only have rendered an already daunting agenda impossible. As it happened, two or three critics or scholars and one artist participated in each session. After delivering a brief set of more or—quite often, alas—less prepared comments, the panelists discussed the theme at hand amongst themselves and fielded questions from the audience.

According to Dr. Angiola Churchill, co-director of the “Art and Ideas” seminar and head of the Department of Art and Art Education at NYU, the public discussions that accompanied previous installments of “Art for the 80’s” were very well attended, often attracting an audience of five-hundred or more. But this season—no doubt partially due to the confusion over the schedule and format—attendance suffered. Only fifty to seventy-five people an evening turned out for each discussion, and of those some number were students enrolled in the associated graduate seminar. NYU’s Eisner-Lubin Auditorium seemed especially cavernous with so little company.

Nevertheless, the underlying pedagogical intentions of the events invested them with considerable interest for anyone concerned with contemporary trends in art theory and

criticism. As Dr. Churchill explained in her opening remarks, the discussions that were staged in conjunction with "Art for the 80's" were conceived in part as a "launching pad" for a new series of courses in art theory and criticism that the International Center is now contemplating. In this sense, however sparsely attended, they may be taken as something of a barometer of current fashion in those disciplines.

The presentations varied greatly in quality and style, from the hyper-academic speculations of Herman Parret, a professor of philosophy at the University of Louvain, to the elusive personal meditations that the painter Dorothea Rockburne offered about her experiences making art. The comments of Deborah Drier, senior editor of *ARTnews*, and Alan Wallach, associate professor of art history at Kean College, New Jersey, fell somewhere in between. Both made cogent but fairly commonplace observations about the troubled place of art in contemporary "bourgeois" society. Leo Steinberg's brief but urbane and witty remarks on the relation between art and criticism undoubtedly marked the intellectual highpoint of the event. He deftly showed how intertwined the categories "artist" and "critic" can be, pointing out that whenever an artist articulates his response to a work of art, even his own, he assumes the role of critic. Mr. Steinberg also displayed a charming patience and generosity in his exchanges with fellow panelists and members of the audience, and his presentation, which he illustrated with a discussion of a painting by Eric Fischl, provided the program with its only real example of applied art criticism.

Indeed, for symposia entitled "Art for the 80's," there was surprisingly little concern with the particulars of art or aesthetic experience. The *term* "art" was frequently invoked, as a kind of talisman, but one often discerned an undercurrent of feeling that seemed not only indifferent but downright inimical to the practice and experience of art *as* art. Observers of current trends in the New York art scene will not be surprised to learn that the preferred alternative was the

practice and experience of art as an ideological tool. As Michael Brenson noted in *The New York Times* last spring, "The most provocative topic in the art world this year is once again the relationship between politics and art." In fact, the enlistment of art in the service of political ideology—seemingly so passé a few years ago—has emerged as the art world's newest vogue. It almost goes without saying that the politics in question tend to be decidedly left of center; but it is important to note that this is irrelevant to the larger issue—the freedom of art from direct political manipulation and ideological commitment. The point is simply that, in many circles today, "being an artist" (and, *a fortiori*, being an art critic or theorist) practically requires that one view art as a repository of ideological "prejudices" of one sort or another.

In "Art for the 80's," the major contributions to this view of art occurred in the first session, by far the most focused and polemical of the program. The participants in that session were the critic Douglas Crimp, who is associate editor of *October* magazine, Carol Duncan, who teaches at The School of Contemporary Arts, Ramapo College, New Jersey, and writes on female imagery in art, and the painter Leon Golub, whose retrospective at The New Museum in New York this fall occasioned much favorable critical attention. The organizing theme of their exchange, entitled "The Collision Between Art and History," was the subordination of art to political imperatives.

Mr. Crimp spoke first, reading part of a paper in which he attacked the "neo-conservative" practice of attempting to segregate questions of artistic merit from questions of political rectitude. The chief targets of his attack were Hilton Kramer's article on art and politics that appeared in the April 1984 issue of *The New Criterion* ("Turning Back the Clock: Art and Politics in 1984") and the allegedly "distorted" view of the history of modern art that the Museum of Modern Art's curatorial policies were said by Mr. Crimp to perpetrate.

In order to appreciate the radical drift of Mr. Crimp's argument, let us first look back for a moment to Mr. Kramer's article. Castigating "the concerted attempt now being made . . . to politicize the life of art in this country," Mr. Kramer reviewed several recent examples of this impulse, most notably the "Art & Ideology" exhibition mounted last winter at The New Museum and the potpourri of exhibitions and other events sponsored by "Artists Call Against U.S. Intervention in Central America." "In more and more exhibitions, publications, symposia, and other public events," Mr. Kramer observed,

we are once again being exhorted to abandon artistic criteria and aesthetic considerations in favor of ideological tests that would, if acceded to, reduce the whole notion of art to little more than a facile, pre-programmed exercise in political propaganda.

And as a kind of motto for these endeavors, Mr. Kramer quoted Lucy R. Lippard's contention, in her manifesto for the "Art & Ideology" exhibition, that "There is no [politically] neutral zone" for art.

Mr. Crimp gave a detailed criticism of certain aspects of Mr. Kramer's essay, accusing him of deliberate misrepresentation and even, if I heard aright, of "red-baiting." But the real issue between them was the concept of art as it has developed in Western culture since the eighteenth-century. At bottom, what Mr. Crimp objected to was Mr. Kramer's insistence that the value of art be determined primarily by aesthetic, not ideological, criteria.

For his part, Mr. Crimp not only advocated the politicization of art, he urged the abandonment of "the very notion of fine art in the interests of social production." He praised the work of Duchamp and German Dada in this context, but the sterling instance of his desideratum was the work of the Soviet avant-garde in the 1920s. Here, in the productions of Agitprop, the Theater of the Revolution, and the photography and propaganda pieces of Alexander Rodchenko,

he found the desired "mass productions for a mass audience." Mr. Crimp did not champion such works as *artistic* creations; rather, he valued them as *political* creations, as harbingers of the goal of "a final transformation of the modernist aesthetic, which would irretrievably and irrevocably alter the conditions of production and reception as they have been inherited from bourgeois society and its institutions." Thus the envisioned view of art, Mr. Crimp stressed, "did not consist of an aesthetics with social implications; it consisted of a politicized aesthetic, a socialist art." Eschewing mere aesthetic concerns, art would then take its place as an instrument of social activism. It would become, to use Lenin's blunt phrase, "a cog and a screw" in the service of a political ideology.

Given this, it is not surprising to discover that the newly re-opened Museum of Modern Art fails to fulfill Mr. Crimp's dream of a socially *engagé* art institution. In part, this has to do with the Museum's curatorial decisions—its decision, for example, to give greater prominence to Picasso and Matisse than to Mr. Crimp's heroes, Duchamp and Malevich. But even more seriously, by relegating much of the work of the avant-garde to departments other than painting and sculpture—to photography or architecture, for example—the Museum "imposes a partisan view of the objects in its possession." That much of the work of the avant-garde happened to be in photography or architecture might seem a reasonable explanation for its consignment to these departments. But Mr. Crimp objects to the very division of the museum along departmental lines, arguing that the priority granted to painting and sculpture is reactionary and elitist. (One of the things he would like to see accomplished, incidentally, is the "destruction of easel painting" as an art form.)

In the end, though, one gathered that Mr. Crimp's distaste for MOMA has more to do with its function as a *museum* than with the way it has discharged its curatorial mandate to identify, preserve, and exhibit works of art. For in his view the real problem with

MOMA is that it de-radicalizes even the radical works it exhibits, taming them, making them familiar, inviting us to look at them as—well, as art. Thus Mr. Crimp was outraged that a poster by Rodchenko for the Theater of the Revolution should be placed directly above a poster advertising martini. Despite their formal similarity, which Mr. Crimp acknowledges, such juxtapositions put the objects on a footing of equality, deliberately blurring “important distinctions in use value” and “transforming Agitprop into advertising.” In his ideal society, clearly, the art museum would have no place.

But, to begin with, it is well to note that this is something that *all* museums do. As Malraux pointed out in *The Voices of Silence*, museums by their very nature tend “to estrange the works they bring together from their original functions.” In the museum, viewed as a work of *art*, neither a poster by Rodchenko nor a Madonna by Duccio retains its original function—acting as revolutionary propaganda in the one case, as an aid to or symbol of religious devotion in the other. These more immediate appeals are deliberately complicated, aestheticized. One may lament or applaud this fact. But in complaining that MOMA fails to distinguish between the “use value” of the objects it exhibits, Mr. Crimp—as he surely knows—is attacking the very idea of the museum as a place for the appreciation of art.

Unfortunately, in rejecting the idea of the museum, Mr. Crimp at the same time threatens to elide an entire dimension of human experience. His position renders inaccessible that ennobling “delight in appearance” for its own sake that Schiller, in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, claimed for distinctively *aesthetic* appearance—“that is, appearance which neither seeks to take the place of reality nor needs to have its place taken by reality.” The crippling effects of such a politically motivated rejection of the aesthetic dimension emerged with special clarity in Mr. Crimp’s criticism of MOMA’s alleged submission to “the corporate view of art.”

Now there may be in fact much worth criticizing about corporate support of the

arts as currently practiced in this country. Its penchant for high-visibility, “blockbuster” exhibitions, for example, or the consequent tendency to measure the success of a show by the size of the crowd it attracts are hardly improving the quality of our cultural life. But Mr. Crimp had something quite different in mind in attacking “the corporate view of art” at MOMA. Referring to a museum press release that described the Bell Helicopter that is suspended above the fourth-floor escalator as a “peculiarly memorable object,” he responded that it was memorable indeed, since helicopters figured in virtually all of a series of drawings he had recently seen by Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugee children. Furthermore, he informed us, the helicopter that hangs in MOMA is manufactured by the Fort Worth corporation Textron, a “major defense contractor,” which also builds helicopters that are currently in use in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and elsewhere in Central America. The clear but unspoken message was that the Museum of Modern Art, in choosing to exhibit the Bell Helicopter, directly implicates itself in the decisions of the United States government regarding Central America.

A similar logic was at work in Carol Duncan’s assertion, with which she began her rather peregrine presentation, that the donor of the Brown Pavilion at Houston’s Museum of Fine Arts had made his money building airstrips and landing pads during the Vietnam War and from nuclear power plants. The Vietnam War. Nuclear power plants. Obviously Houston’s Museum of Fine Arts represents the monied interests of the Military Industrial Complex. This curious but alarmingly common paralogism, which confuses provenance with function, blinds those under its spell to the most elementary distinctions. Pre-empting art with ideology, it renders any properly *aesthetic* appreciation of things impossible.

Of course, the ideology in question need not be confined to politics as traditionally understood. Almost any social issue or special interest can be so enlisted. As Michael Brenson noted in his *Times* article:

... the definition of "politics" has expanded to the point where, at the moment, it seems as if it might supercede [*sic*] and swallow up all artistic criteria. Within some art and art-critical circles, "political" now applies to cultural imagery, the functioning of the art market, the artist's attitude towards any subject and the creative process itself. In other words, the word "political" has become a filter through which all art can be perceived and judged.

Miss Duncan proved to be the evening's specialist in such maneuvers. For while she began by confessing that she was "not really sure that artists should be political," she nevertheless maintained that "the major *meaning* of art is really its ideological use." But her interest was drawn chiefly to the ideology of sexual politics. The museum as it has developed in Western culture, she told us, does "an ideological number on the visitor that has to do with male-female relations and what is really said about women in the museum, and male attitudes toward women." Thus Miss Duncan wanted to turn MOMA into MOPA—The Museum of Patriarchal Art—and to "reorganize all those collections and . . . have large galleries that identify works as galleries of male pathology, for example. Featuring, first of all, *Les Femmes d'Alger* and all those works by Picasso . . ." Picasso, she said, did not "create a single image in his whole life of a woman as a human being." (I wonder if Gertrude Stein would have agreed?)

After all this, Leon Golub's remarks came as something of a surprise. Golub is an accomplished and forceful, if somewhat melodramatic painter, and his reputation has soared in recent years as his increasing interest in overt political subjects and public taste have intersected. But though he is a self-confessed "political artist" who can proclaim that "all art is propaganda at some level," he was the only one of the three panelists who displayed any real appreciation of the qualities of art as *art*. He also recognized, incidentally, that only in Western Europe or the United States would it be possible for him to practice the kind of art

he is interested in unhampered by state sanction. Mr. Golub was taken aback by Mr. Crimp's uncompromising call for the politicization of art no less than by Miss Duncan's extraordinary treatment of Picasso. His main interest, he told us, was in the fate of "history painting since David," but he nonetheless made a plea for the cultivation of all styles and genres of art—abstract as much as figurative or narrative work—and he insisted, to his colleagues' obvious displeasure, that art had meaning and value not reducible to its ideological "content."

The evening concluded with a long question-and-answer period. One audience member, an artist who had emigrated to the United States from a Communist country, complained that the proceedings that evening had a familiar ring. He felt, he said, that he had heard the same thing before he came to this country, "that my work is valuable if I serve either the politics of the government . . . or if I fight against those politics. I cannot choose the path in between . . ." This of course put the panel in an embarrassing position. In such circles, being from a Communist country naturally confers an aura of legitimacy, making one as it were a spiritual brother-in-arms. But here was this fellow who had the cheek to call into question the demand for a politicized art and who wondered why his art couldn't be appreciated for its own sake, as art.

It cannot be said that Mr. Crimp actually addressed this point but he did explain that things are not as different here as they might seem from the way they are in a Communist country. For here the notion of art for art's sake functions as the "official state ideology" just as Socialist Realism does in countries of "actually existing socialism." Only it's all the more insidious in the United States because the mechanisms of control are less obvious. What we have here is a system of "totalized assent," Mr. Crimp said, adding that "there is almost no such thing as an opposition . . ." "So you're not sitting there?" a woman in the audience interrupted cruelly, but to no effect. And with a panache that reminded me of Herbert Marcuse's

wonderful idea of “repressive tolerance”—wonderful because it is the sort of thing that can never be refuted by empirical reality—Miss Duncan elaborated that it is one of “the contradictions of a liberal Western society” that it incorporates dissidence, thus rendering it harmless.

Inevitably someone asked whether Mr. Crimp was advocating the reduction of art to propaganda—that was, I confess, what I had thought he wanted to do—but, no, he explained, he wanted a “politicized art,” not propaganda. Offering the work of Hans Haacke as an example, he explained that “there can be a politicized art that isn’t strictly propaganda.” What he had in mind was Mr. Haacke’s “Isolation Box,” an eight-foot, unpainted wooden cube bearing the sign: “Isolation Box As Used by U.S. Troops at Point Salines Prison Camp in Grenada.” One of the works that Mr. Kramer had attacked in his essay on art and politics, “Isolation Box” was exhibited last winter at the City University’s Graduate Center Mall as part of “Artist’s Call.” As Mr. Crimp affirmed, this piece makes “a direct political statement.” But he denied that it is propaganda. By the same token, one could complain that the grocer had given you only six eggs when you’d asked for half-a-dozen. Perhaps Mr. Crimp had some intelligible distinction in mind here, but I suspect that

this is a subtlety that one must espouse in order to grasp.

The really disturbing thing about the evening was not the quality of the discourse—appalling as it often was—but the thought that this was representative of the material out of which a major university proposed to forge a new series of graduate courses in art criticism and theory. Such blatant politicizing can only mean the abnegation of art as an independent realm of endeavor. And apparently this is just what Mr. Crimp would like to see happen. For him, one gathered, the only alternative to a politicized art is an extreme aestheticism, a view of art as a completely autonomous activity, unrelated to human hopes, dreams, and fears. But one can criticize the politicization of art without therefore subscribing to such aestheticism. “Poetry,” as Auden said in his elegy for Yeats, “makes nothing happen.” But this doesn’t prevent it from moving, refreshing, enlightening us, from having a profound effect on how we see ourselves and the world around us. Between *l’art pour l’art* and *l’art engagé* there is a considerable area of artistic latitude. Indeed, it is in that middle distance that most artists, living and dead, have chosen to work, though Mr. Crimp and his fellow critics, embracing the strict dictates of ideology, would have us limit our allegiance to one extreme.

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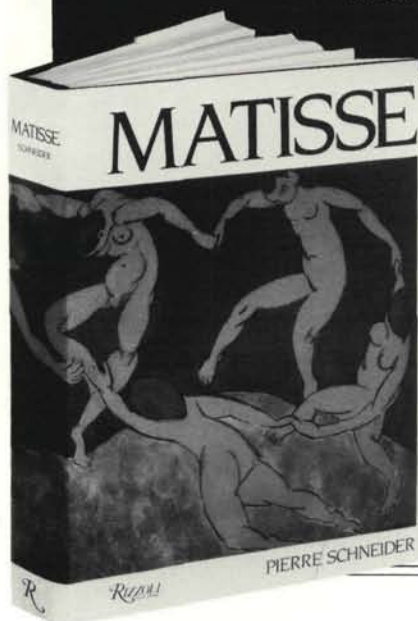
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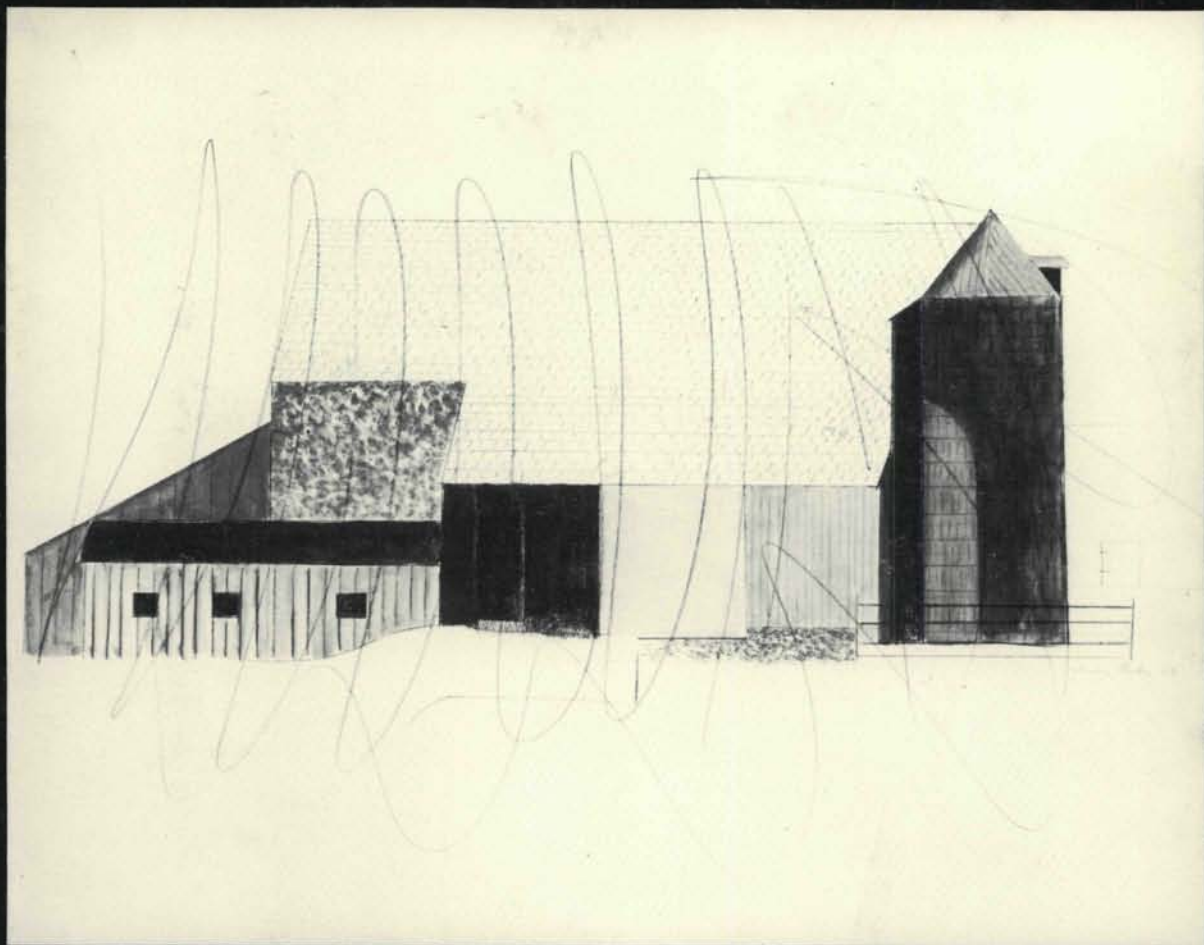
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